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Portsmouth's Political Patterns 1885-1945

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PORTSMOUTH'S POLITICAL PATTERNS 1885-1945

By G. J. Ashworth, BA, MPhil, PhD

This paper, unlike others in this series, is not directly concerned with the issues and personalities of Portsmouth's political past. Instead electoral returns are used to draw patterns of political opinion through the city, and to trace changes in political sentiment over time. The simple act of voting, performed many times in a lifetime by individuals who are unlikely themselves to appear in the history books, reveals much that subjective judgements can usually only hint at. The sum of these individual decisions determined the political tone of the city, its internal political tensions and the nature of its representation on the national legislature.

1885 is an appropriate year at which to begin. The spate of electoral reform acts between 1872 and 1884 quickened the movement towards a representative democracy, and by this date there were the rudiments of a two-party political system at both national and local level. 1945, at the other extreme, was viewed by many at the time and since as the dawning of a new age, and represented after the years of war a fairly clear break with the politics of the 1930s. The eclipse of the Liberal party by Labour as the party of opposition was complete both nationally and locally, and after six election-free years the personalities that had dominated the local scene were largely replaced by a new cohort.

Sources of electoral information are diverse in nature and variable in quality. The size and distribution of the electorate can be obtained from the registers, and the Portsmouth municipal year books record the names and wards of city councillors and aldermen and the results of parliamentary elections. Two essential pieces of information, however, are usually missing from official documents—the actual number of votes cast and the party affiliation of candidates. Portsmouth was fortunate in having local newspapers which took an active interest in politics and reported fully the results of every contest. Coyness about assigning political labels can be circumvented by noting the scrupulously complete lists of attenders at party-sponsored meetings and social events. The local press was wholly partisan; the *Portsmouth Times* and the *Evening Mail*, later the *Southern Daily Mail*, were Conservative, and the *Hampshire Telegraph* was Liberal, at least in the early period; but used together they provide an illuminating contemporary archive.

Some of the main characteristics of the Portsmouth electorate need an introductory mention. The importance of the military base is difficult to overstress. The garrison numbered around 4,000 in the pre-1914 period. The Navy provided both political issues and voters from among serving and retired sailors in the city. Most of both of these groups could be relied upon to support the Conservatives, and large numbers of both Conservative voters and party officials were drawn from this group. The dockyard workforce was another important element whose numbers expanded greatly in rearmament phases and reached 13,000 in 1910. Portsmouth therefore had a characteristic more usually associated with a northern industrial town, a large industrial working-class. The political favour of this class was fiercely fought for and its capture by the radical left took much longer to accomplish than in regions devoted to the coal or iron industries, possibly as a result of the association of the political right with rearmament and thus dockyard employment. Both the Conservative and the Liberal 'Working Men's Associations' were vital elements in their respective parties.

A second important element was the nonconformist vote, and Portsmouth had a long tradition of nonconformist dissent which in 1910 probably accounted for around half of the churchgoing population of the borough. Nonconformity was strongly associated with the temperance movement in the last quarter of the century, particularly after the establishment of the 'Portsmouth Band of Hope and Abstainers' Union' in 1873, and both were aligned with the Liberal cause. The new mood of political involvement that swept nonconformity after 1880[1] led to an active participation of dissenters in the Portsmouth Liberal Association, Board of Guardians and School Board.

Finally the development of the seaside resort at the end of the century[2] and the consequent growth of a retired population, including large numbers of naval pensioners, introduced an element whose support of the Conservative interest has been a mainstay of that party in the southern part of the city down to the present day.

1 PARLIAMENTARY PATTERNS

There is obviously a strong relationship between the political patterns revealed by electoral behaviour at Parliamentary elections and at municipal elections. Some of the same personalities were involved at each level, the political organisations selecting candidates and financing and managing campaigns were normally the same, and voters committed to a political stance were liable to support candidates of the same party at each governmental level.

Nevertheless there are fundamental distinctions between parliamentary and municipal patterns. There

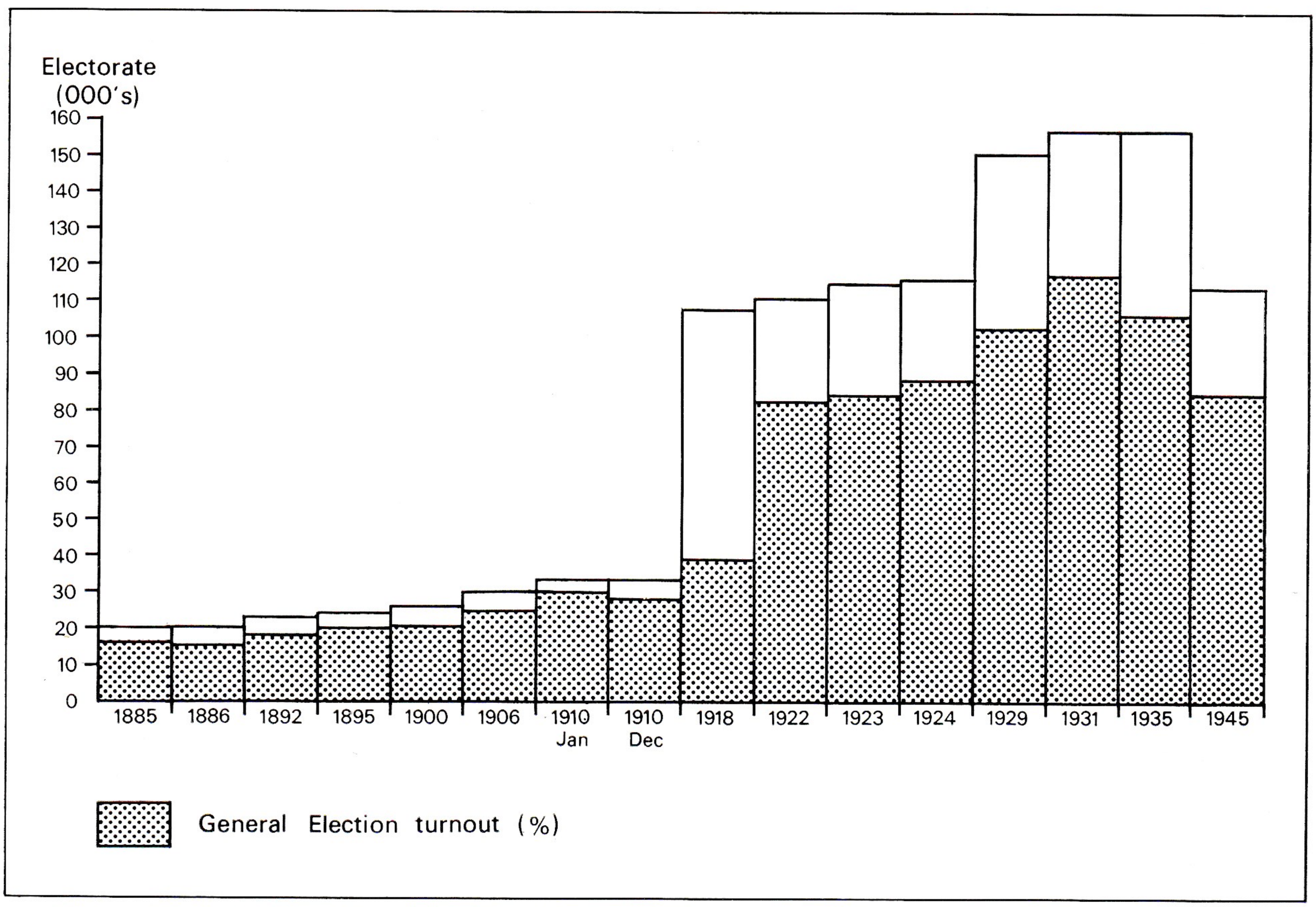


Figure 1: Parliamentary Electorate and Turnout.

was a basic difference in the composition of the two electorates, which were determined by different sets of criteria with the result that the parliamentary electorate exceeded the municipal in size by around 5% throughout most of the earlier period of this analysis, owing to the more rigorous financial requirements applied in local elections. This anomaly lessened during the course of the period but even by the 1945 election the municipal and parliamentary registers were still marginally different. The exercise of their electoral rights by those entitled to vote was similarly different, with turnout rates for parliamentary contests being typically more than double those for local elections. Differences in the perceived importance of national as opposed to local issues, the absence of nationally generated 'election fever' in local contests, and the less generous regulations governing postal and proxy voting in municipal elections, all contributed to this distinction. The lowest recorded parliamentary turnout in Portsmouth in this period was 52.3% (Portsmouth North 1918) and the poll reached 92.6% in 1910, whereas in contrast the best local turnout was the 89% polled in Buckland ward in 1898, while the average municipal poll had dropped to only 32.4% by 1937.

Although changes in national political sentiment were usually promptly reflected in local political changes, issues specifically relevant to Portsmouth, and within the legal competence of the corporation, plainly dominated both the platforms of candidates and the minds of electors during municipal elections, while parliamentary elections in Portsmouth in this period were concerned with great national issues such as Irish Home Rule, Tariff Reform or Rearmament. In addition the statutory requirement to hold municipal elections for a portion of the council each year and the continual appointment of councillors to fill aldermanic vacancies, thus causing by-elections, determined that the number and frequency of local elections far exceeded that of parliamentary elections. During the 60 years under review there were 38 parliamentary and nearly 900 municipal elections. Municipal results therefore are a more responsive indicator of changes in political sentiment, and give valuable glimpses of shifts in opinion between infrequent parliamentary elections.

Finally, there was in practice in Portsmouth a much smaller coincidence of municipal and parliamentary candidates than might have been expected. Only 6% of parliamentary candidates had previously served on the local council.

The electorate

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed significant changes in electoral law and the franchise was extended to include more than half the adult male population of the country. The Acts of 1872, 1883 and 1884 successively introduced the secret ballot, abol-

ished the most obvious corrupt practices and finally enfranchised 88% of adult males, increasing the national electorate to over five million. The main effect of the Representation of the People Acts of 1918 and 1928 was to enfranchise women, initially aged over 30 and finally over 21, increasing the national electorate to 21 and 28.5 million successively.

Electoral practice differed from that current today in two major ways which complicate attempts to assess the size of the electorate and calculate the turnout rate. Inclusion on the electoral register had to be claimed by the individual potential voter and legal eligibility to vote was not the same as actual registration. In 1911, for example, it is estimated that only 59% of the adult male population actually claimed the franchise[3]. The contest between the parties, their supporters and lawyers, over registration preceded, and was almost as hard fought as, the election itself. Secondly, the possibility of plural registration was offered on a variety of property, business and academic qualifications. Plural voting, however, was less common but probably accounted for around 7% of the total vote in the 1880s and lingered on throughout the period under review until finally abolished in 1948. The difficulty in calculating the size of the plural vote in any given election, and the uncertainty about where an individual with plural registration but one vote actually voted, render all estimates in this period marginally inaccurate.

The increase in the Portsmouth electorate (Figure 1) can be related both to the franchise extensions mentioned and the steady growth in the population of the city experienced until the first world war. The reform of 1884 had a greater impact on rural areas as a much higher percentage of urban populations already had the vote but the addition of women after 1918 and 1928 is well marked, and at each election from 1929 women were in a majority in all of the Portsmouth constituencies.

Between 1885 and 1918 the constituency was represented by two members (Figure 2). The parliamentary boundary reform of 1918 divided the greatly increased electorate of the city into three single-member seats with electorates ranging from 35,367 (Central) to 37,427 (South). The South, corresponding to the wards of Havelock, Highland, St Paul, St Simon and St Thomas, included the districts of Old Portsmouth, Southsea and Eastney, while the North, with the wards of North End, Mile End, Meredith, Charles Dickens and Portsea, was similarly fairly easily defined in terms of existing neighbourhoods in the north and west of the city, defying its name by

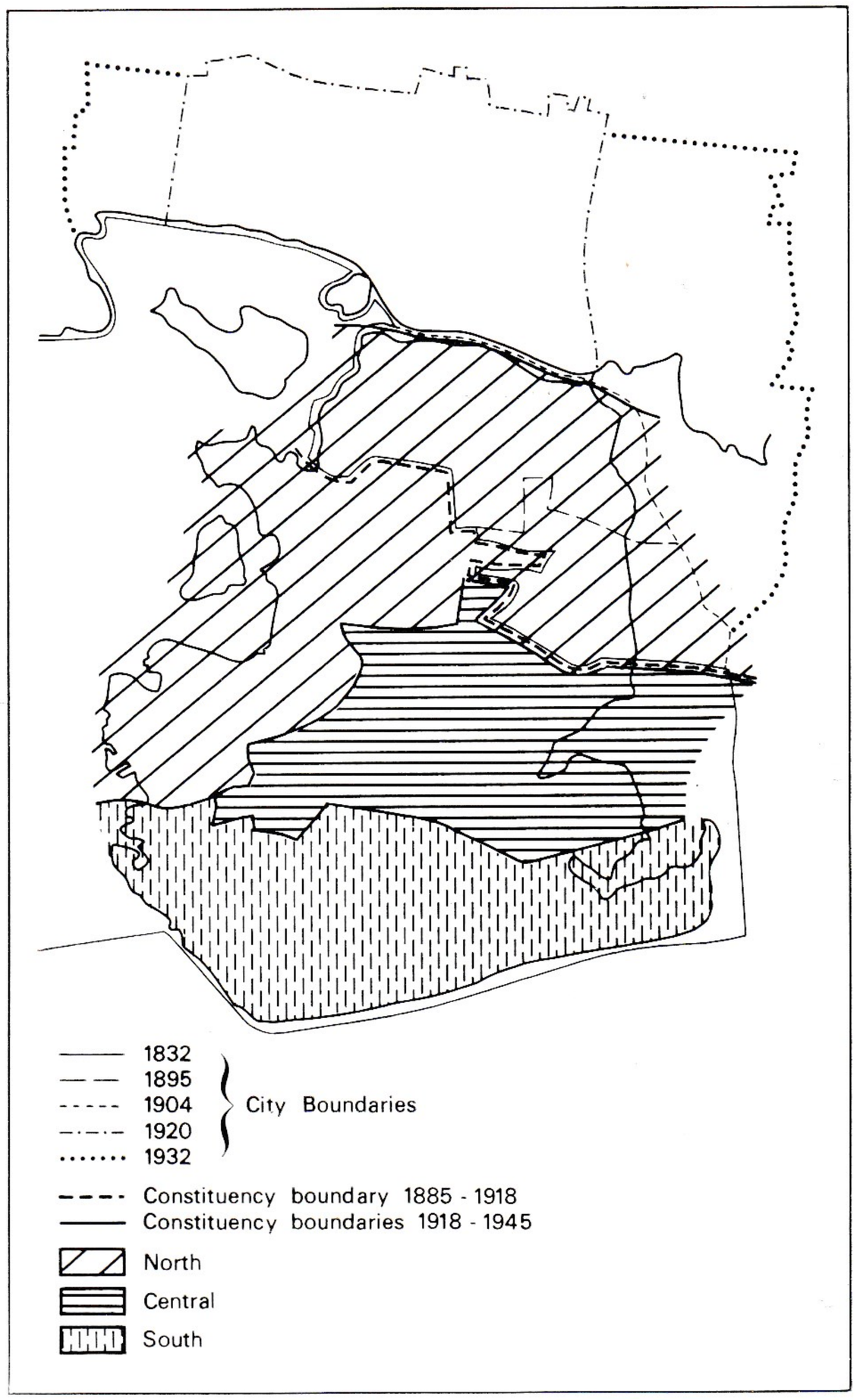


Figure 2: City and Constituency Boundaries.

stretching as far south as the Portsea 'Hard'. The Central seat, however, was formed from the wards of Buckland, Fratton, Kingston, St Mary and Town Hall, and thus constituted a narrow but densely peopled strip stretching across the island sandwiched between North and South.

Turnout rates in Portsmouth were influenced by both national and local circumstances. Figure 3 shows that Portsmouth in common with the rest of Britain experienced a fever of political activity at the crisis points of modern British electoral history, such as 1885, when tariff reform and the Irish issue loomed large, the Liberal 'landslide' of 1906, the constitutional crisis of 1910, and the 'red scare' of 1924. Portsmouth, like the country as a whole, achieved the highest response in January 1910. Election weariness and a fall off in response can similarly be detected in elections that occurred close to a previous contest such as those of 1886, December 1910, and 1923. Local interest was, however, stimulated when a 'needle-match' in a marginal seat seemed likely, as occurred in the 1922, 1923 and 1924 struggles in

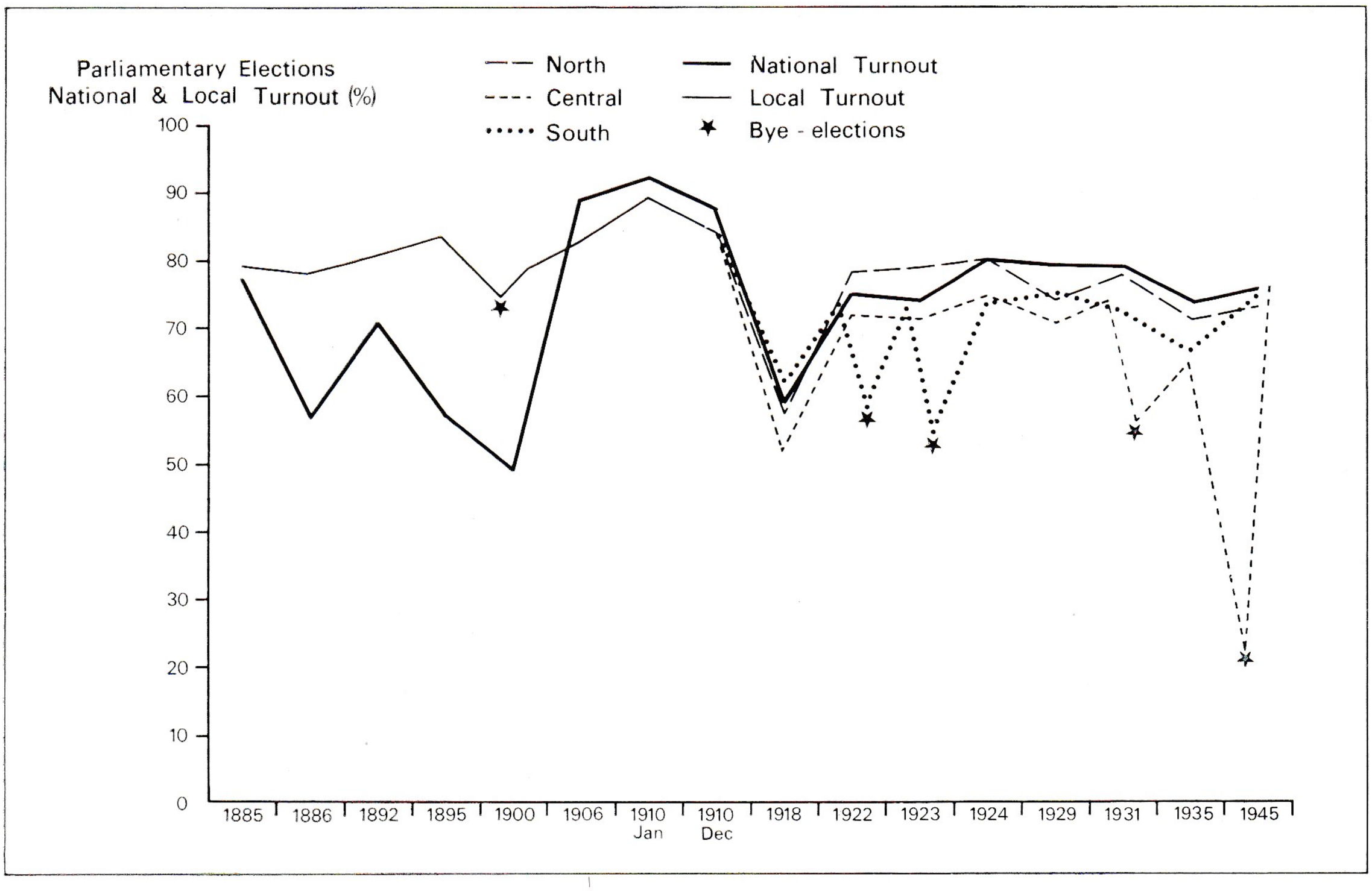


Figure 3 above: National and Local Parliamentary Turnout 1885-1945.

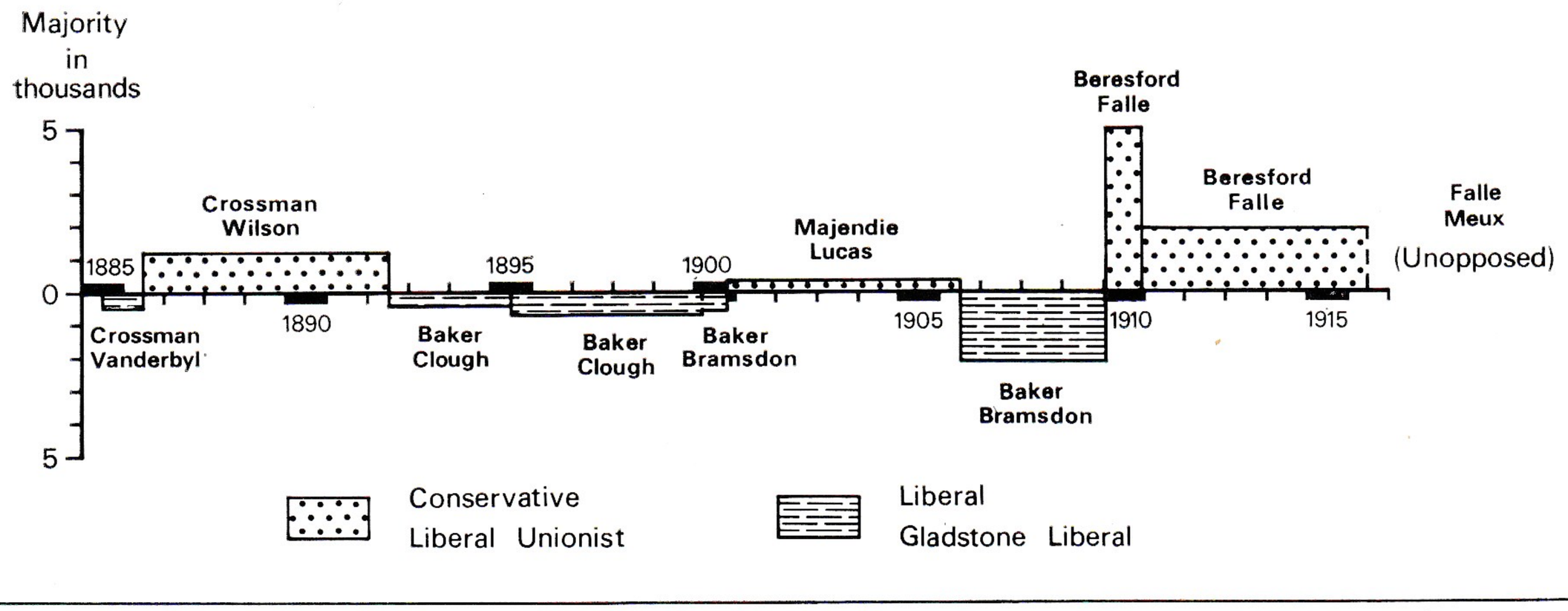
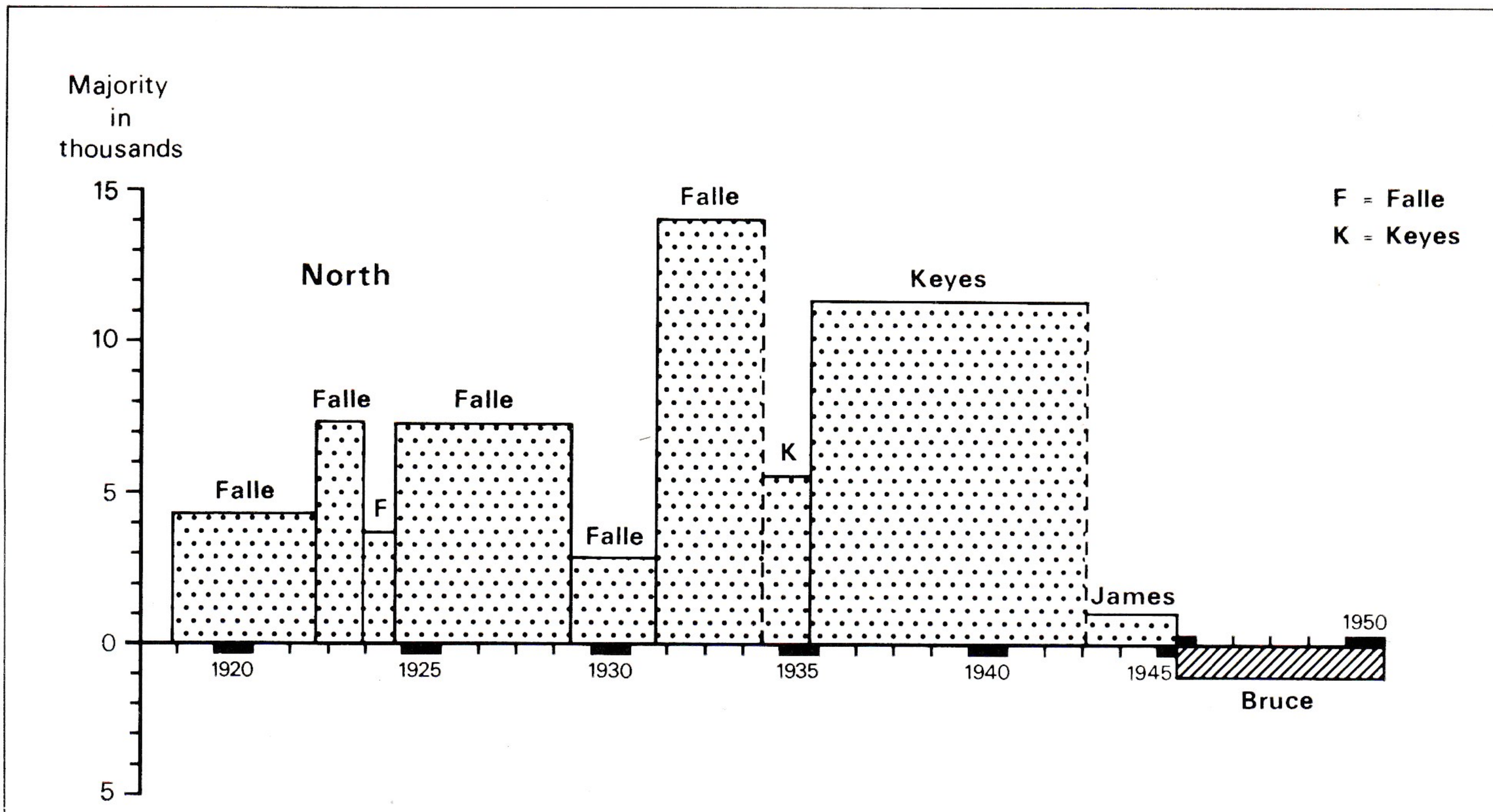


Figure 4 below: Parliamentary Political Majorities 1885-1918.

Portsmouth Central. Indeed, the marginal Central seat polled consistently higher than the 'safe' South seat. Similarly, a variation in the usual straight two-party contest or the candidature of a vigorous local 'character' stimulated interest, as for example Frank Privett's 'unofficial' run in South in 1924. By-elections fail to generate the support of a general election, and a succession of by-elections, such as occurred in South when four elections were fought in 13 months in 1922–23, led to an extreme disaffection of the electorate and the lowest response rate ever obtained in the city.

The Chronology

Eight general and two by-elections occurred for the two-member seat between 1885 and 1916, and eight general and five by-elections took place between 1918 and 1945 for the three single-member seats (Figures 4). The most widely used method of analysing changes in political allegiance is the calculation of 'swing' which



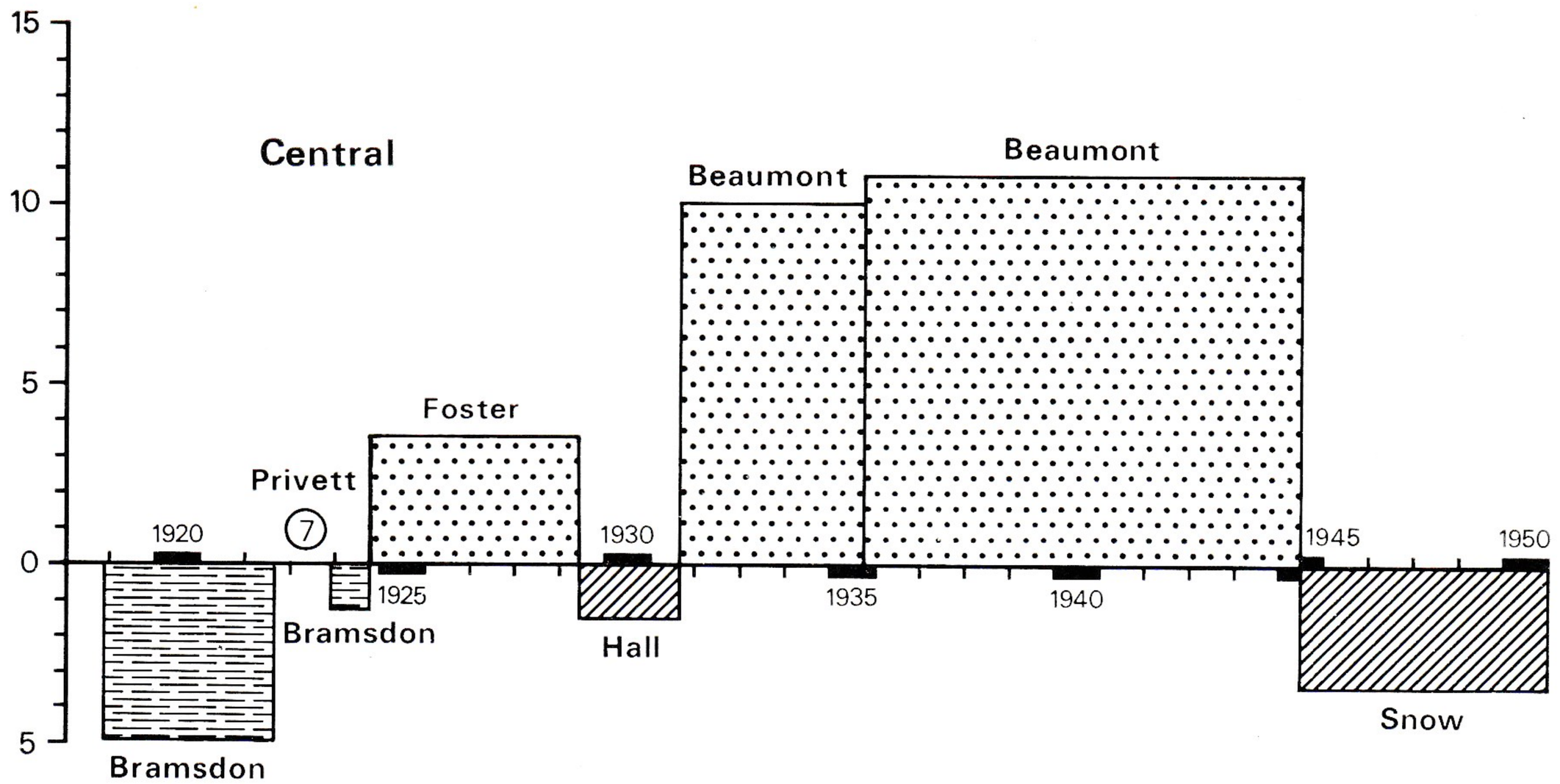


Figure 4(a) above: Parliamentary Majorities 1918-1950 Portsmouth North.

Figure 4(b) below: Parliamentary Majorities 1918-1950 Portsmouth Central.

measures the change in the percentage of the electorate voting for each party between successive elections. This is a reasonably useful index for most of the early period when support oscillated between two major parties and the local and national swings can be compared. It becomes much less useful when third parties intervene, and in much of the later period when the vote is fairly evenly divided between three contenders the swing figure can be misleading.

The elections of 1885, 1886, 1892 and 1895 were dominated by national issues of which the 'Irish Question' was the most intrusive with such imperial matters as the death of Gordon in the Sudan providing political capital for local Conservatives. A national

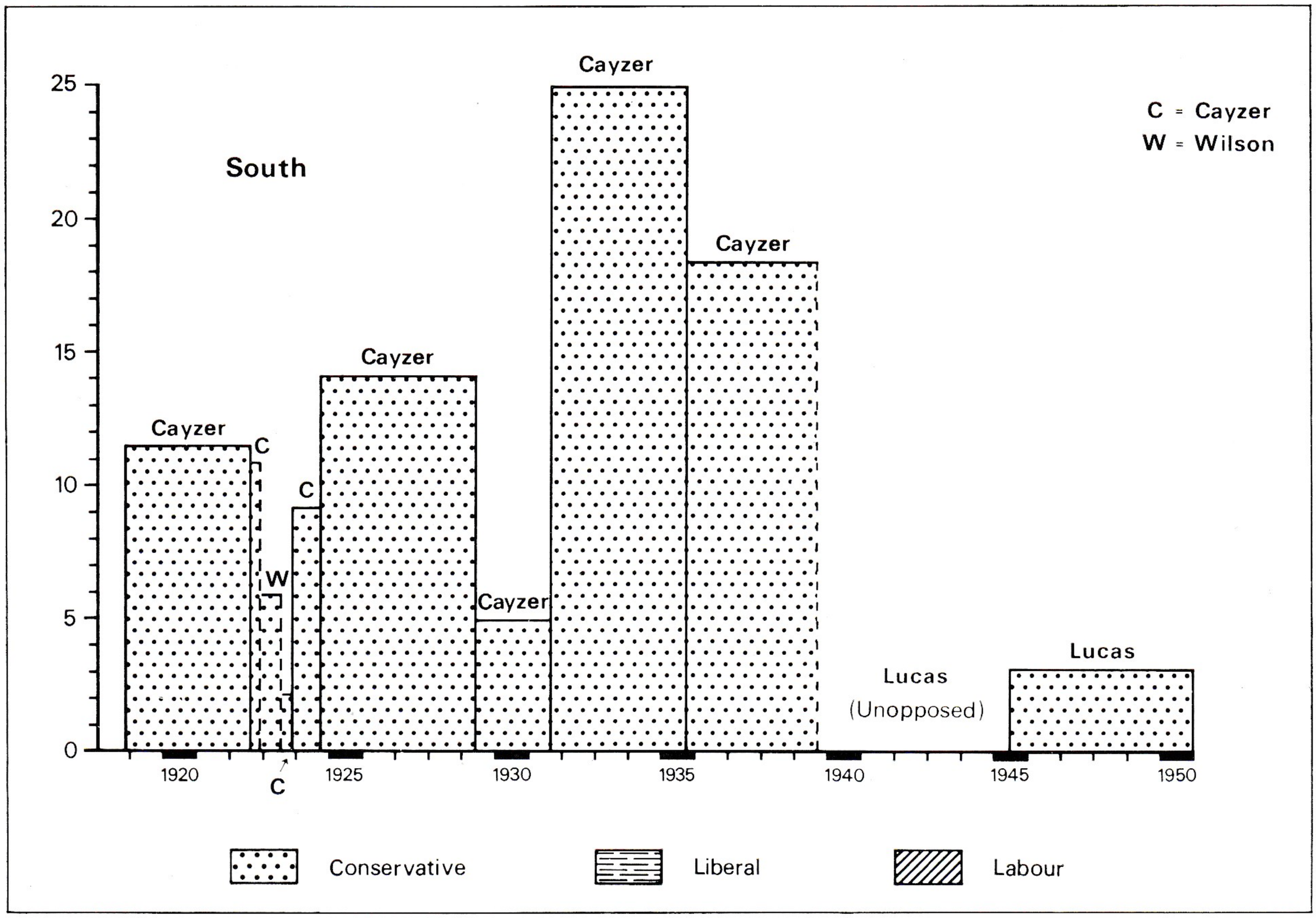


Figure 4(c): Parliamentary Majorities 1918-1950
Portsmouth South.

swing to the Liberals in 1885 successfully unseated the Conservatives Bruce and Wolfe in favour of the Liberals Crossman and Vanderbyl, despite a vituperative personal attack on the latter's financial integrity by the local Conservative press. Sir William Crossman, however, split with the Liberals on the issue of Irish Home Rule and was adopted by the Conservatives as a Liberal Unionist candidate in 1886. A local swing of over 6%, above the national average unseated Vanderbyl and Baker, a local Liberal alderman brought in to replace the defector, who ran as 'Gladstonian Liberals', and replaced them with Crossman and his Conservative running mate Wilson. If the Irish Question was the Liberals' albatross, tariff reform was equally damaging to the local Conservatives, and by 1892 the pendulum had swung back 5% to the Liberals, around four times the national average, and returned the seat to the 'Gladstonians' Baker and Clough over their Conservative and Liberal Unionist opponents Willis and Ashley respectively.

The election of 1895 was closely fought and nationally there was a small swing to the Conservatives. In Portsmouth, however, the sitting members, Baker and Clough, the former with strong local connections, successfully beat off a challenge from Ashley, the previous contender, and Harmsworth, the future Lord Northcliffe. The resignation of Clough in 1900 caused a by-election in May, which should, on national trends, have given the seat to the Conservatives but the Liberal choice of Bramsdon, the local coroner, was sufficient to defeat Majendie, the new Conservative contender. The general election of 1900, however, was fought in an atmosphere of war hysteria, particularly marked in the garrison town of Portsmouth, and a 3% swing was sufficient to topple Baker and Bramsdon and replace them by the Conservatives Majendie and Lucas.

The election of 1906 marked the 'Indian summer' of the Liberal party when a national swing of around 4% produced over 400 Liberal members at Westminster. Locally, it was notable in producing six candidates, the largest number ever to contest a Portsmouth seat. Baker and Bramsdon romped comfortably home for the Liberals, beating the Conservatives Hills and Whitelaw by over 2,000 votes. Even at their moment of greatest triumph, however, the seeds of the later eclipse of the Liberal party could be detected in the candidature of Sanders, previously unknown, who stood as an Independent Labour candidate and polled over 8,000 votes. The success of this first Labour intervention is possibly more remarkable, and certainly more indicative of the future, than the Liberal victory itself. The sixth candidate, Jane, the compiler of naval records, stood as a 'Navy' candidate, the first of a string of independents to appeal directly to Portsmouth's naval connection; but

he, like others to follow, failed to make an impact.

Two elections occurred in 1910, in January and December, and the constitutional issue, centred on the Lloyd George budget and the reform of the House of Lords, dominated both. In both the local Conservatives did well. In January, Sir Charles Beresford, a nationally-known naval figure, and Falle took the seat from Bramsdon and Lambert, who had replaced Baker as Liberal candidate, with a local swing to the Conservatives of four times the national average. In December the Liberal challenge of the new candidates, Hemmerde and Harben, was beaten off although some of the Liberal vote was regained. Sanders endeavoured to repeat his personal triumph for Labour in 1906, but in January 1910 his vote was cut by more than half and no Labour challenger appeared for the December election. No election was held between 1910 and 1918 owing to the intervention of the Great War. The acceptance of a peerage by Beresford created a vacancy in 1916 which was filled by the Conservative Meux unopposed.

In 1918 both North and South constituencies returned Unionists to support the Lloyd George coalition. Only in Central was a non-coalitionist Liberal successful, when Sir Thomas Bramsdon, who had lost his seat in 1910, returned to Parliament. In North there was only Independent opposition and the Labour candidates in Central and South came third to Unionist and Liberal contenders respectively.

The 1922 election was marked by a strong swing back from the Conservatives to both Liberal and Labour with the latter superseding the Liberals as the main opposition in North. In both Central and South, however, there were local complications to modify the national swing. A 'National Liberal' candidate opposed Bramsdon in Central, and the Conservative challenger was the locally well-known alderman Frank Privett. A fiercely fought four-cornered contest resulted in an almost equal quartering of the total vote and the return of Privett with a majority of seven. This was the smallest parliamentary majority recorded in Portsmouth. The election also gave a local illustration of the fission that was damaging the Liberal party. In the Southern seat an equally unique situation occurred, but in this instance the strength of the incumbent party prevented the loss of the seat. The resignation of the sitting member Cayzer in December 1922, and then of his successor Wilson in August 1923, together with the closeness of the general elections of November 1922 and December 1923, resulted in no fewer than four elections in the constituency in 13 months and declining enthusiasm, even among the Conservative faithful, reduced the majority to its lowest point.

There was a substantial national swing to Labour in the 1923 election. In Portsmouth the Conservatives Falle and Cayzer held the North and South seats respectively although Labour had become established as the principal opposition in each. Bramsdon, with this time a united Liberal vote, recovered the Central seat from the Conservatives in what proved to be the last Liberal Parliamentary victory in the city.

The collapse of the short-lived first Labour administration led to the 1924 election which was fought in an atmosphere of near-hysteria created by the forged 'Zinoviev Letter', which the *Portsmouth News* published in full on the eve of polling. The demise of the Liberals as a serious political force in the city was evident. They fought only the Central seat, this time unfortunately without the sitting member and locally popular Bramsdon, and were not only dispossessed but reduced to third place, the seat being won by the local Conservative alderman and ex-mayor Foster. The Conservatives Falle and Cayzer comfortably beat off the Labour challenge in North and South respectively and increased their majorities.

In 1929 a national swing of well over 7% to Labour was reflected in Portsmouth by the capture of one seat and an increased vote in the other two. Central had the distinction of being the first Portsmouth seat to be represented by a Labour MP, Will Hall, who fought on the employment issue. Falle and Cayzer hung on for the Conservatives in North and South in the face of swings to Labour of 8% and 17% respectively despite the attempt of the former to raise again the spectre of 'Bolshevism'. Liberals stood in all three seats but remained poor thirds. A peculiarity of the Southern contest was that the Conservative Privett, who had narrowly won Central in 1922 and been ejected in 1923, endeavoured to obtain the South Conservative nomination. On failing to dislodge Cayzer he stood as a 'constitutionalist', but even this split in the Conservative vote was insufficient to cause the loss of the seat. What had happened to the Liberals in Central in 1922 was not repeated with the Conservatives in South in 1929.

The 'national' government had little opposition in Portsmouth in the 1931 and 1935 general elections or 1934 by-election in North. In 1931 the 14% national swing to the Conservatives was sufficient to unseat Hall in favour of the Conservative Beaumont in Central and strongly reinforce the Conservative hold on North and South, the latter being distinguished by recording the highest percentage of the vote ever

received by a candidate in Portsmouth, 80.1%. The local Liberal Federation having decided to 'put country before party' and support the Conservative 'national' candidates, only Labour opposed the Conservatives, with the single exception of a lone and ineffectual renegade Liberal in the Central constituency in 1935. The banner headline in the *Portsmouth News* on the day after the 1931 election proclaimed 'the axe descends on Socialism' and the Conservative majorities substantiated the rhetoric. Some Labour recovery was evident in 1935 but the Conservative hold on all three seats remained unshakeable, with Admiral Sir Roger Keyes replacing Falle in North.

The Labour post-war landslide was all the more unexpected given the strength of the Conservative party in the city in the 1930s. The by-election in North in 1943 could however have been regarded as a straw in the wind. Although under the terms of the wartime political truce no Labour candidate was adopted, a 'Commonwealth' candidate, whose social and economic policies were very similar to Labour's, reduced the Conservative majority to just over 1,000 in a 22% poll. The swing to Labour in Portsmouth in 1945 was about twice the national average in all three seats. Central was recaptured, with Snow replacing Beaumont, and North went Labour for the first time, with Bruce defeating the Conservative Howard. Only in South did Lucas hold on to the seat for the Conservatives with a greatly reduced majority. No Liberals stood, 'Commonwealth' failed to realise its 1943 promise, and a 'Lower Deck' candidate, Foster, failed to rally the naval vote behind him in Central.

Seats

The most noticeable characteristic of the Portsmouth parliamentary seats throughout the period is their overall volatility. A comparison of the local change in party support with the national change shows that on the whole Portsmouth tended to follow the national inclination but with consistently more emphasis. In 1906, for example, the Conservatives nationally lost around 7% of their vote, while in Portsmouth their loss was a staggering 23%. Similarly in January 1910 a national Conservative gain of 3% can be compared with a local gain of 24%. During the interwar years all three Portsmouth seats exceeded the national swing to the Conservatives in 1924 and 1931; and the post-war renaissance of Labour, large as it was nationally, was all but doubled in the three Portsmouth constituencies. Only rarely, as for example in 1922 and 1935, were national swings dampened in Portsmouth and only on one occasion, the Liberal victory of 1895, was a national swing of 0.2% to the Conservatives reversed locally to a swing to the Liberals of 0.5%.

The average Conservative share of the vote between 1884 and 1910 was only 47.9% which was the lowest of any seat in the otherwise Conservative 'heartland' of Central Southern England[4]. In addition the existence of opposed partisan local newspapers and a 'political' town council made for a relatively high level of political awareness.

It has been suggested that the Portsmouth constituency before the first world war was characterised by a dominance of local and especially naval issues, and by a tendency to swing against the government in power when naval programmes were not pursued with sufficient vigour[5]. Neither claim can be satisfactorily substantiated. The Liberal success of 1885 might have been influenced locally by the rumoured Conservative proposal to transfer ship repair work from the dockyard to private yards, but the local swing was not greatly in excess of the national average. Similarly in 1892 local dissatisfaction with the dockyard administration may have increased the Liberal vote but a similar national trend is noticeable, while the 'Big Navy Programme' strongly advocated by Beresford in Portsmouth may account for the swing to the Conservatives being four times as large as the national average. In no case, however, can it be demonstrated that local issues generated a swing against the national trend.

The period after the first world war saw a division of both the constituency and the parties into three. The Southern seat was easily the safest, with the Conservative vote only rarely dropping below 60% of the total; and the Labour vote of 45% in 1945 was quite exceptional with 25% being the more usual vote for the principal opposition. The Northern seat similarly could in most circumstances be regarded as safely held by the Conservatives although the security was not as complete as in South. The Conservative vote oscillated between 45 and 68% with the Labour opposition normally managing to poll around one-third of the total vote and on the single occasion of 1945 taking the seat. The Central constituency is in many ways the most interesting of the three and certainly the most changeable. In eight elections the Conservatives won four times and the Liberals and Labour twice each. A strong Liberal tradition and an effective candidate provided a viable opposition to the Conservatives up to 1924 when Labour took over as the opposition party. The Conservative vote only exceeded 50% in the years of the 'national' government and on the remaining six occasions was surpassed

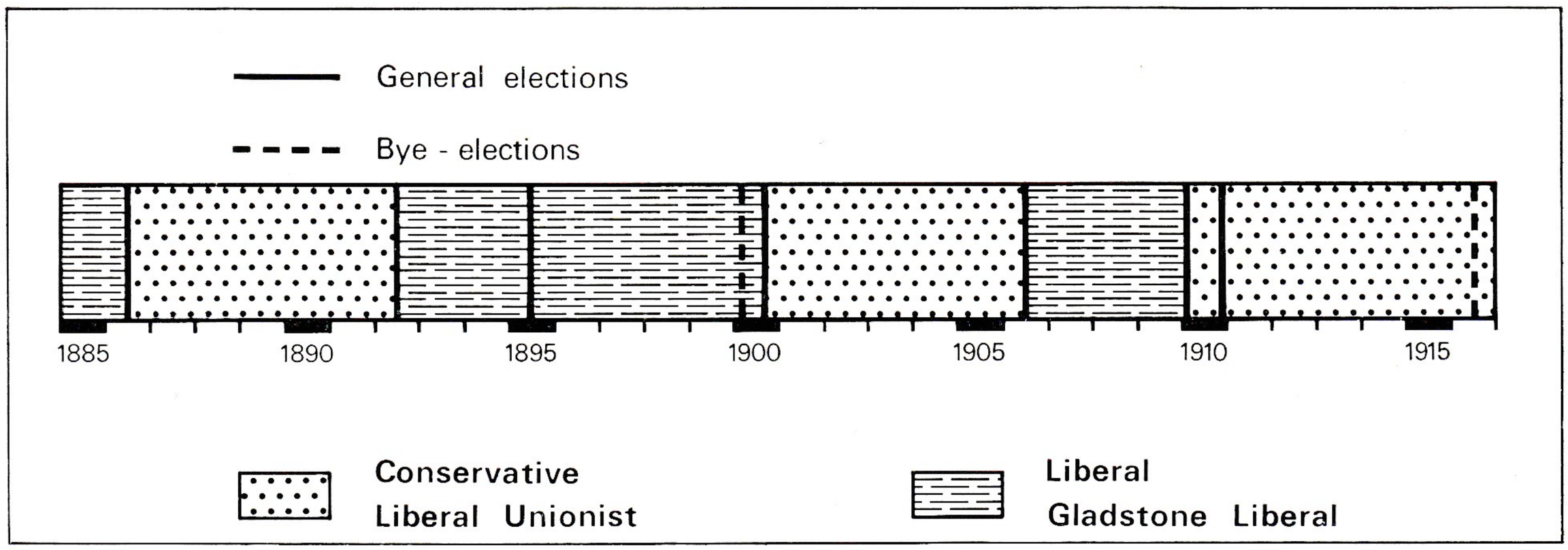


Figure 5 above: Parliamentary Representation 1885-1918.

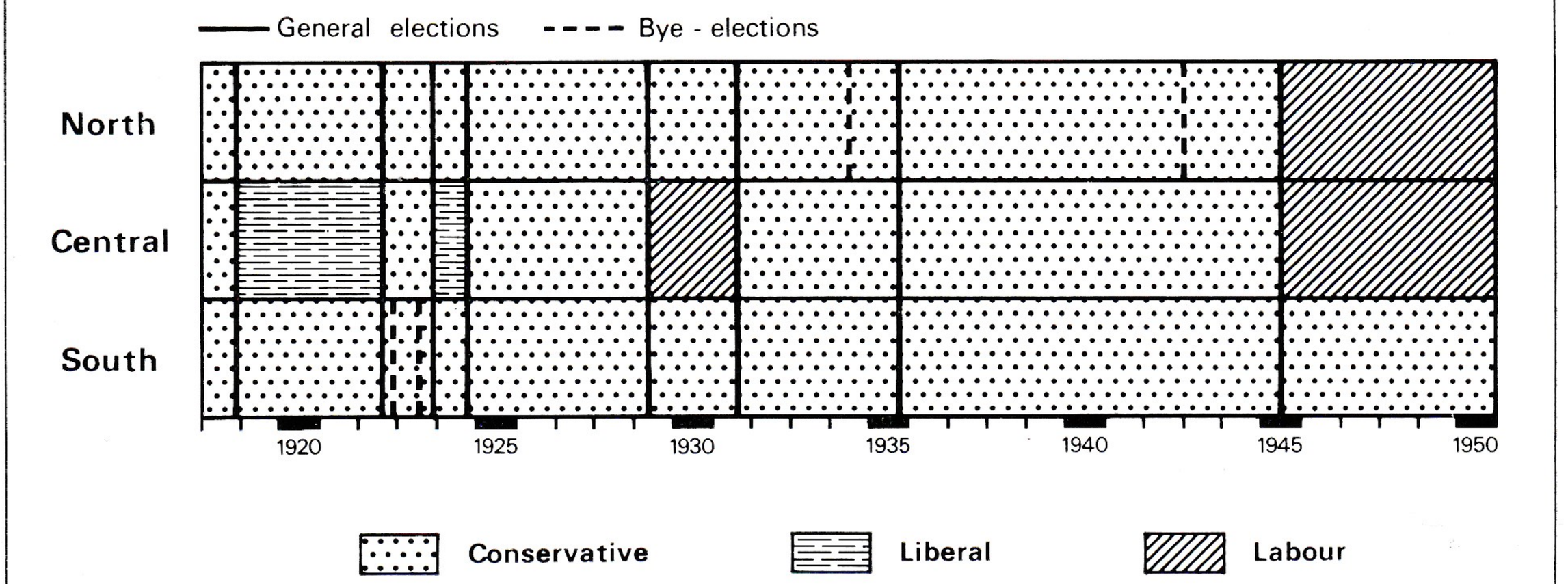


Figure 5 (a) below: Parliamentary Representation 1918-1950.

by the combined opposition vote. The Central seat provided all the Liberal successes and all but one of Labour's between 1918 and 1945.

Parties

The Conservative party has dominated the Portsmouth Parliamentary scene during this period (Table 1). In 19 of the 33 years of the dual-member seat the city was represented by two Conservatives, and in the 28 years of the three constituencies the Conservatives represented South for all 28 years, North for 27 and Central for 20 (Figures 5). The most interesting change over the period therefore has been not a shift in the party of government but the substitution of Labour for Liberal as the principal opposition party.

A gap of at least a generation existed between the enfranchisement of the working-man and the rise of working-class candidates, issues, and parties. This long transitional phase in Portsmouth can be dated from the legislation of the 1880s until at least the 1906 elections. During this period it is also clear that although the local Liberal party was the vehicle of nascent radicalism, if only by Conservative default, the working-class vote was fairly evenly divided between the parties. At each of the elections between 1885 and 1900 Portsmouth radicals, both as individuals and through their institutions, pledged their support with varying degrees of enthusiasm to the Liberal candidates.

The move towards separate representation was encouraged by both national events, such as the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, and local friction between the Portsmouth Trades Council and the Portsmouth Liberal Association. The running of an ILP candidate in 1906

TABLE 1

PARLIAMENTARY VOTES, CANDIDATES AND MEMBERS

	% *Votes*				% *Candidates*				% *Members*		
	Con	*Lib*	*Lab*	*Ind*	*Con*	*Lib*	*Lab*	*Ind*	*Con*	*Lib*	*Lab*
1885–1910	49.2	47.0	3.2	0.5	45.9	45.9	5.4	2.7	47.1	52.9	0.0
1918–1945	55.9	11.7	28.2	4.3	38.8	19.4	31.9	9.7	82.1	7.1	10.7
Total	53.8	22.5	20.5	3.2	41.2	28.4	22.9	7.3	68.9	24.4	6.7

and his spectacular success in reaching within 2,000 of the Liberal vote marked the turning point in the Lib-Lab alliance. Even before this the Portsmouth Liberals, sensing the threat to their cause presented by a separate Labour party, offered an electoral pact in 1903, in which in return for the withdrawal of the Labour candidate the Liberal Association would sponsor a Labour replacement on the retirement of either of their contenders. As the retirement of Sir John Baker could be expected and in fact occurred before the 1910 election, this seemed a reasonable offer. The Labour party, sensing perhaps both its new-found power and the hint of desperation among the Liberals, refused the pact. The success of 1906 appeared to justify this refusal. Baker's death and Bramsdon's temporary illness left the Liberals without a candidate in 1910, and a faction suggested that Sanders the Labour candidate should be adopted. By this time, however, neither side was enthusiastic and the idea of a Lib-Lab alliance was effectively dead.

Internal divisions within the Liberal party hastened their decline. A 'Lloyd George' Liberal Association was established in 1918 in the Central constituency, successfully splitting the Liberal vote and causing the loss of the seat in 1922. Bramsdon's recapture of the seat for the Liberals in 1923 proved only temporary and Labour's share of the vote climbed successfully between 1918 and 1929, whilst that of the Liberals petered away. By the mid-1920s the Liberals had ceased to contest all seats regularly, while Labour contested every seat from 1923 onwards. A glance at the effect of the sporadic Liberal interventions between 1929 and 1935 seems to indicate that far more Liberal and Conservative votes were interchangeable than Liberal and Labour ones. With the local Liberal Party's total support of the 'national' government between 1931 and 1945 the Liberals appear to have shifted completely from left to right in the political spectrum.

Minor parties and Independents have not done well in Portsmouth parliamentary elections. True Independents have never done better than Yexley's 38.2% of the poll in North in 1918, and more usually have polled less than 10%. The most successful minor party was 'Commonwealth' which polled 40.3% in North in 1943, but the dismal record of 'Commonwealth' and 'Democratic' candidates in North and Central in 1945 is much more typical. Disaffected members of major parties running against official candidates have done much better, causing the loss of a seat in Central in 1922 and the near-loss of South in 1929.

Finally the parties differed in the nature of the candidates themselves. Predictably the Conservative ranks were dominated by businessmen, the military, and those who described their occupation as 'gentlemen', while the Liberals favoured the professions, especially the law. The Labour party, perhaps surprisingly, did not adopt exclusively manual workers but included teaching and the professions. The Conservatives played the naval card most strongly with such nationally famous naval names as Beresford and Keyes, but curiously enough the local Labour party was not averse to selecting high-raking service men, mustering a Labour Brigadier-General (Central 1923) and a Labour Rear-Admiral (North 1931), to counter a Liberal Lt.-General (South 1923), Rear-Admiral (South 1923) and Brigadier-General (South 1929), and the two Conservative Admirals of the Fleet.

It is also very noticeable that the Conservatives consistently imported candidates whilst the Liberals chose principally local men. Typical of the Liberals were such men as Baker, a former mayor, and Bramsdon, the local coroner; and there can be little doubt that the quality of the Liberal candidates and their local fame counted for much in the election results of the period. The Conservatives, however, as the local 'party of government' reasonably chose MPs as well as candidates and looked for individuals who had already 'proved themselves' in national commercial or military circles. Labour fell between these extremes. Most Labour candidates were local and either served an apprenticeship on the council or developed a local expertise by working a seat at successive elections, such as Jessie Stephen who built up the Labour vote in South between 1923 and 1931. The big Labour successes, however, were in fact won by outsiders, Sanders, a LCC alderman, in 1906 and Will Hall, from Labour party headquarters, in Central in 1924 and 1929.

2 MUNICIPAL PATTERNS

The Electorate

The municipal electorate was selected by different criteria from the Parliamentary. Through most of the period property qualifications and plural registration were more important at the local level, although in one major respect the municipal franchise was more progressive, in that women who fulfilled the property qualifications in their own right were not disqualified. Candidates' manifestoes occasionally made a special appeal to the female vote, which by repute was slow

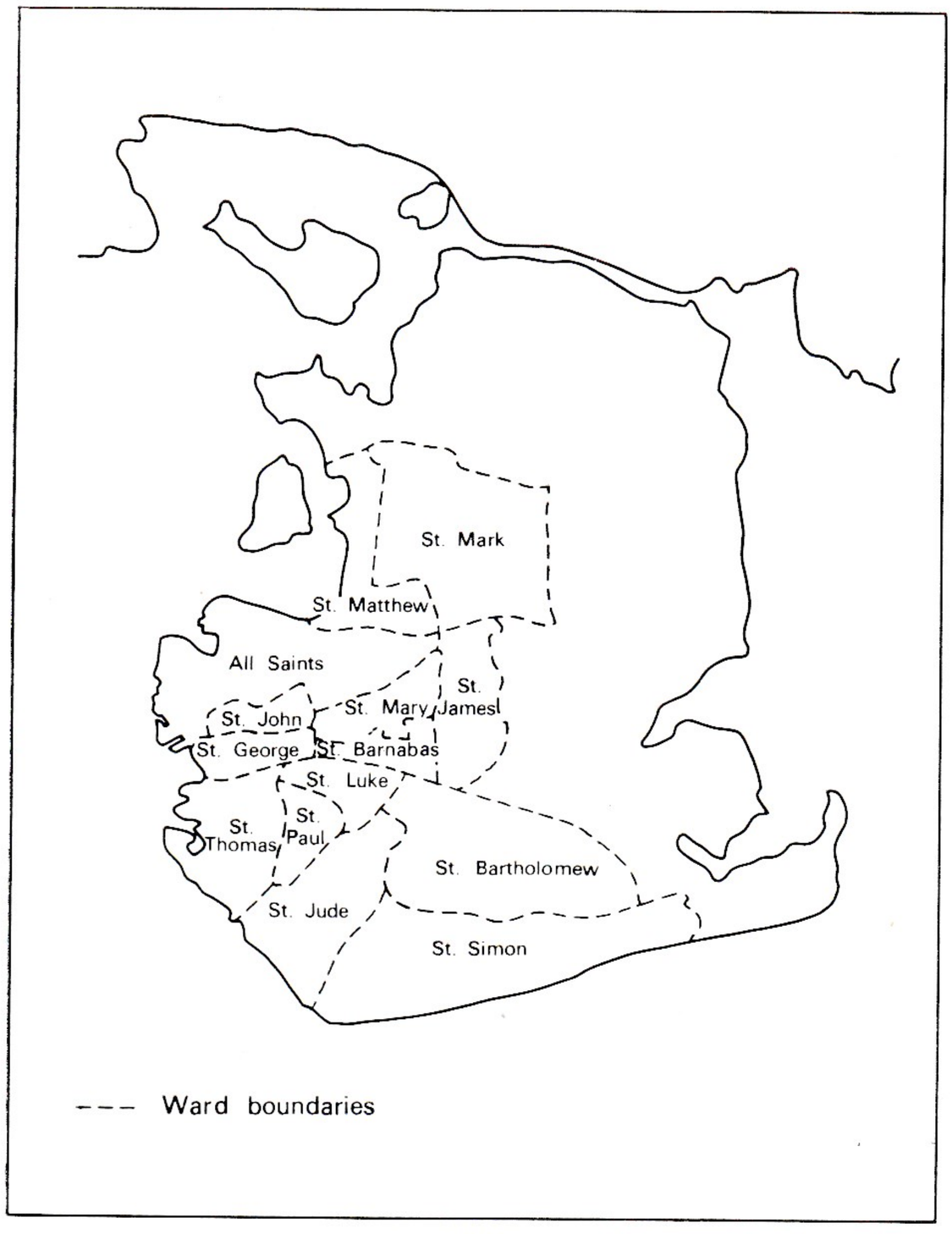


Figure 6: Ward Boundaries 1885-95.

Figure 7: Ward Boundaries 1895-1945.

to turnout, but the numbers involved were small and there is no evidence of women playing a decisive electoral rôle before 1919. Although voting, women were disqualified from candidature until 1918 when the first woman candidate, sponsored by the Women's Electoral Association, contested and won the St Simon's by-election. Few followed this trailblazer and between 1918 and 1938 only 3.9% of candidates and 1.7% of elected members were women. Not only did few stand but those who did had small chance of success.

The large number of uncontested elections renders calculation of overall turnout rates meaningless. At individual elections, turnout appears to be influenced by the same criteria already mentioned in the parliamentary context. High turnouts are associated with marginal seats and seats where the clash of well-known personalities can be witnessed. It is also notable that the Labour successes of 1908–13 were achieved on a significantly higher turnout than usual for those seats. A low response rate, similarly, was usually associated with wards where a change of control was unlikely. By-elections, however, did not seem to follow the parliamentary pattern but tended to produce a higher rather than lower rate of response. Two general observations on turnout are particularly well illustrated. The rates are well in excess of those experienced in the post-1945 period and a general downward trend in response is evident throughout the period, with the newspapers being repeatedly appalled at growing local apathy at each successive election. Differences in registration procedure that make it more likely that those who have troubled to register will also vote is likely to explain some of this decline in municipal responsibility.

A major contrast with the Parliamentary pattern is the large number of seats left uncontested. In the period 1885–95 48% of all elections were unopposed, compared with 52% between 1896 and 1914 and only 23% in the interwar period. The rise of Labour and the injection of a stronger ideological element did much to render the uncontested election obsolete. Neither Conservatives nor Liberals had a clear advantage in uncontested seats before 1914, with 108 Conservatives and 101 Liberals so elected. Only very rarely was a Labour member awarded a walkover. Plainly, some seats were more prone to be uncontested than others, depending very largely on the strength of party support. Walkovers were commonest in the safe Conservative seats of St Thomas and St Simon or safe Liberal seat of Fratton. Volatile seats such as Buckland, Kingston or St Mary were rarely uncontested. The electoral strength of the individual however was, at least in the early period, as important in this respect as political allegiance. Individuals such as T. S. Foster, H. Pink, or Hellyer were likely to be uncontested although their ward colleagues were.

Between 1885–95 the city was divided into 14 wards (Figure 6). The comprehensive reorganisation of 1895 radically redrew boundaries and created 14 new three-member wards. These survived until 1945 with the addition of Meredith (1928) and Cosham (1921),

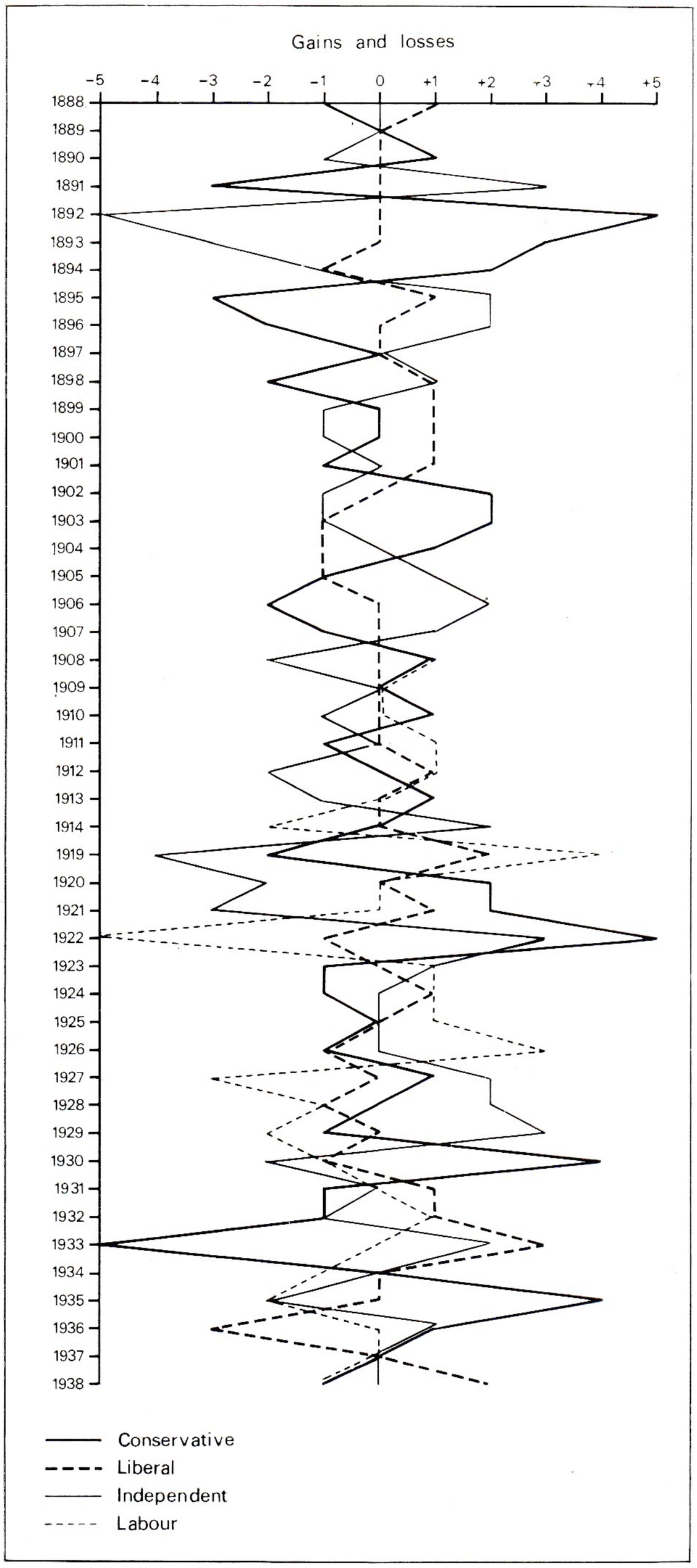


Figure 8: Municipial Gains and Losses 1885-1938.

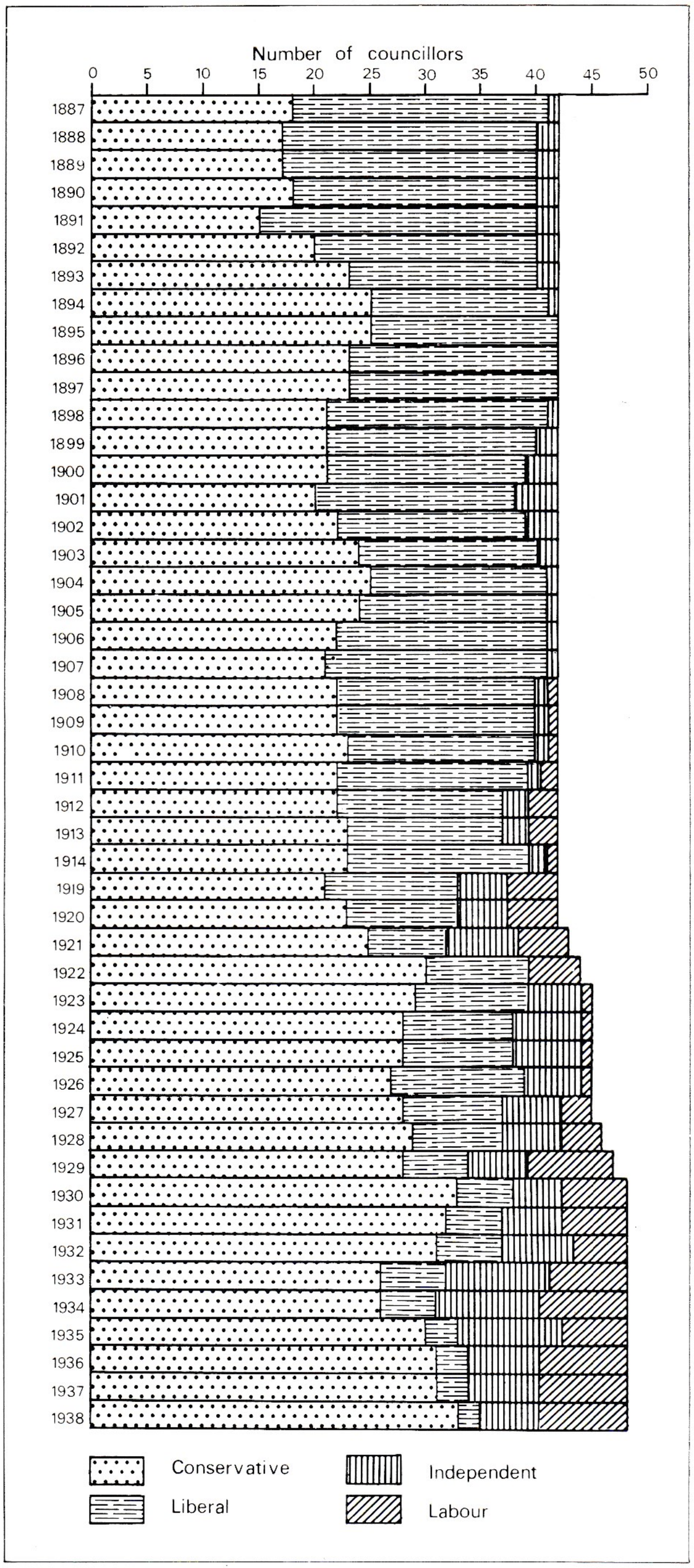


Figure 9: Political Composition of the Council 1885-1938.

the renaming of Mile End as Nelson (1928) and Town Hall as Guildhall (1928), and minor boundary alterations (Figure 7).

Chronology of elections

A narrative of the chronology of change over the period is much more difficult with municipal than parliamentary elections. A clear picture is confused by the large number of contests involved, nearly 900; and the mixture of local and national issues makes it difficult to determine the causes of change. Figure 8 traces gains and losses, Figure 9 the changing balance in the council chamber and Figures 10 and 11 the changing allegiance of individual wards.

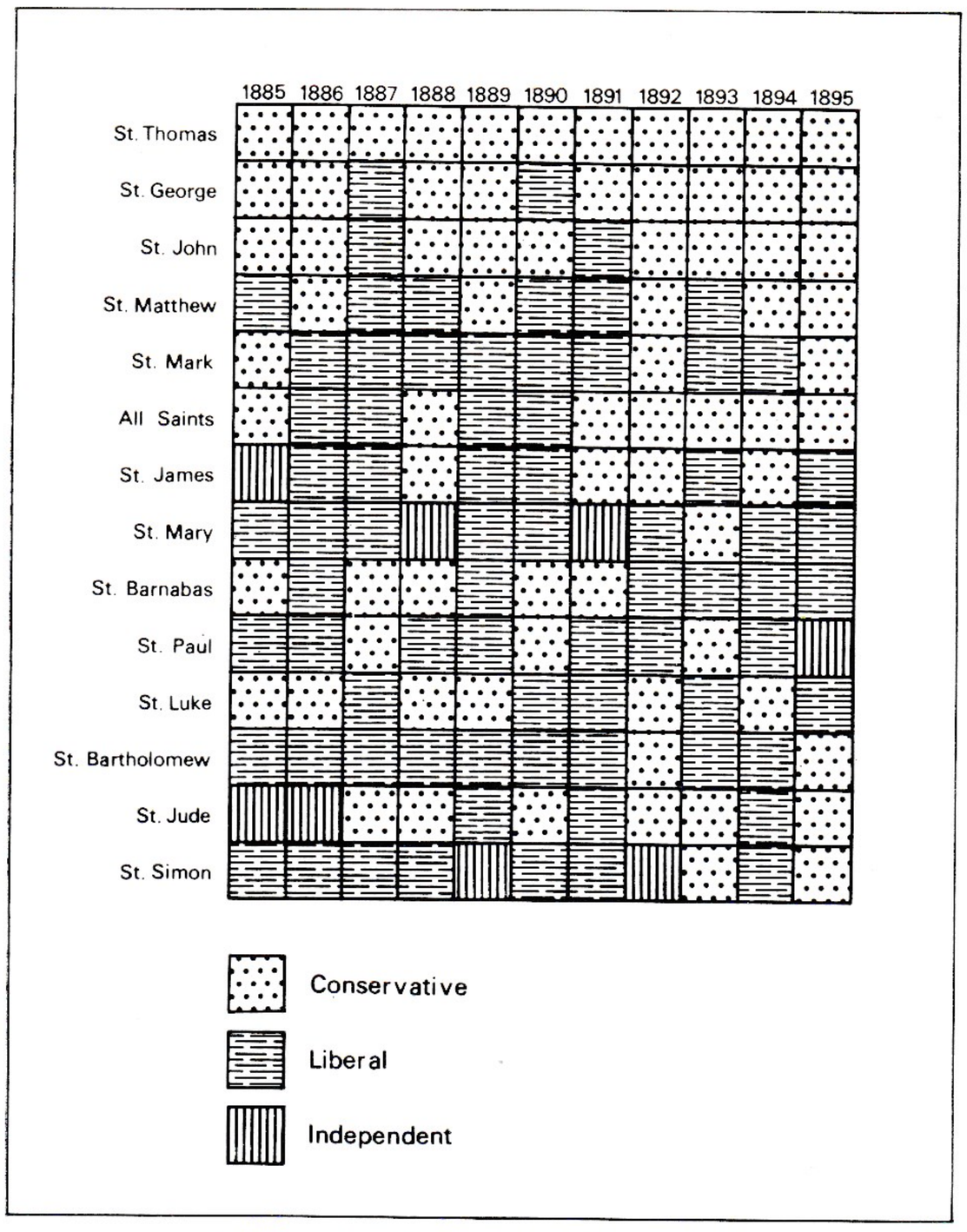
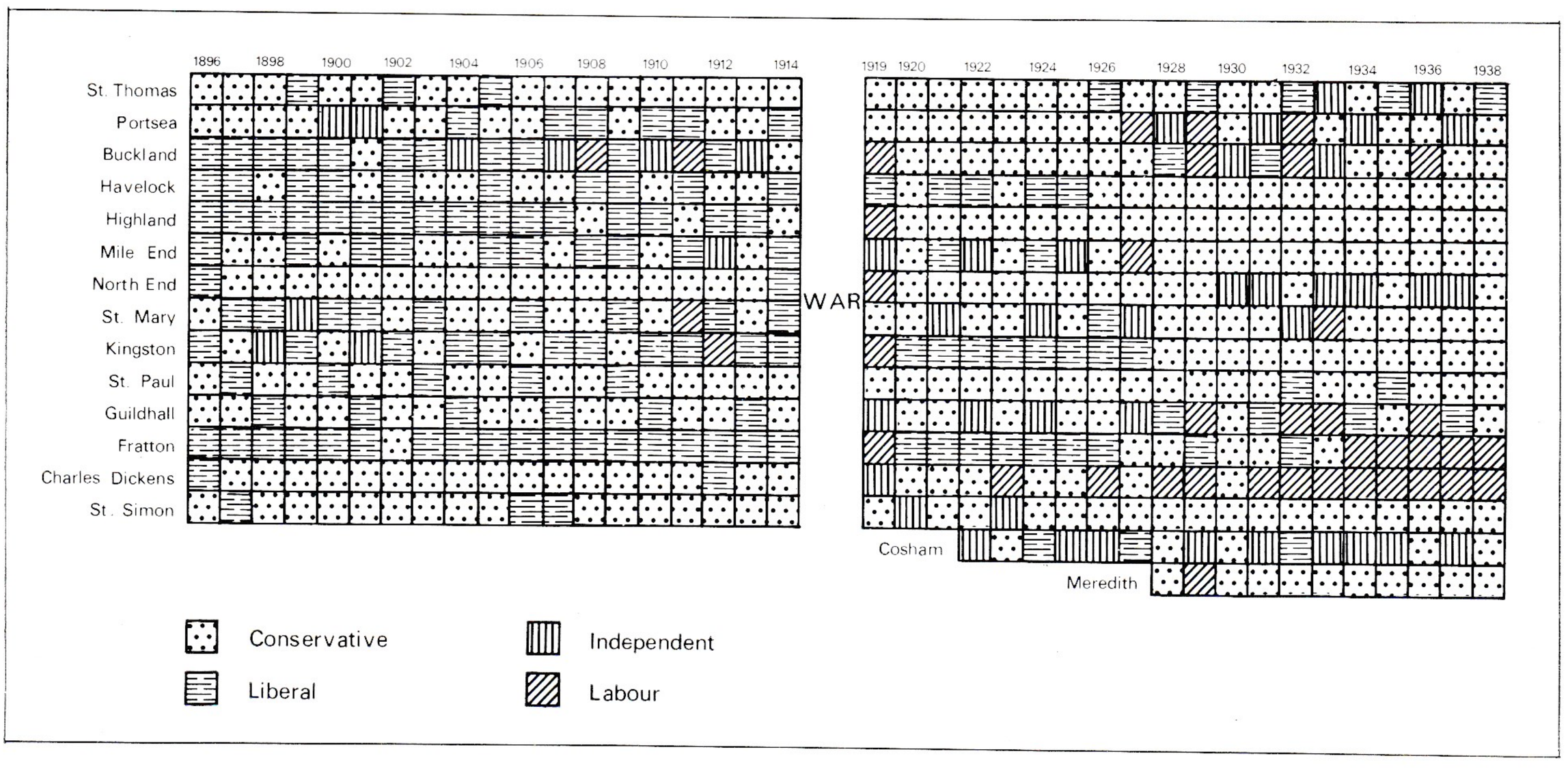


Figure 10: Political Allegiance of Wards 1885-1895.

At the start of the period in 1885 the Conservative interest could generally count on a clear majority of the City Council, with 33 broadly committed Conservative votes to 20 Liberals with three genuine Independents. The late 1880s were by and large good Liberal years with substantial Liberal advances being made in 1886 and 1887, and previous gains were held when councillors came up for re-election in 1888 and 1889. This was despite a local swing to the Conservatives in the 1886 general election. The aldermanic system prevented electoral changes being quickly reflected in political control in the town hall and Conservatives dominated the aldermanic benches by two to one at this time. Nevertheless by 1890 the parties were almost balanced numerically. The period 1890–95, however, was one of Conservative gains at Liberal expense, despite the general elections of 1892 and 1895 both showing local swings to the Liberals. In this period, however, Liberals were defending seats which had been narrowly won in the good years of the late 1880s, and the loss of such seats as All Saints, St Matthew's and St James' could have been expected in 1892. The loss of St Bartholomew by only 32 votes in 1892 and St Mary in 1893, both traditionally reliable Liberal seats, was more serious and indicates a fundamental loss of support. The 1895 election, the last in the old wards, brought relief to the Liberals, all the more unexpected as they had been defeated in two by-elections earlier in the year. St James' was regained, St Mary's was held and St Luke's which on the trend

Figure 11: Political Allegiance of Wards 1896-1938.



could have fallen to the Conservatives was uncontested.

The 1885–1895 period brought little cheer to either party. The Conservative hold on the Council was as strong at the close as it had been at the commencement of the period, and 77 Conservatives had been elected compared with 76 Liberals. The Liberals, however, had polled overall 50% more votes than the Conservatives, without this being reflected in council seats, and despite gains in the 1880s a net loss of five seats was suffered (Table 2).

TABLE 2

MUNICIPAL VOTES, CANDIDATES AND MEMBERS

	% *Votes*				% *Candidates*				% *Members*			
	Con	*Lib*	*Lab*	*Ind*	*Con*	*Lib*	*Lab*	*Ind*	*Con*	*Lib*	*Lab*	*Ind*
1885–1895	47.7	49.2	1.0	2.2	44.7	49.6	0.8	4.8	50.0	49.4	0.0	0.6
1896–1914	46.0	34.9	11.9	7.2	48.7	35.7	9.3	6.3	56.1	40.4	1.6	2.0
1919–1938	48.8	9.2	31.5	10.5	43.3	9.0	33.0	14.6	64.2	13.2	11.3	11.3

The first few years of the new wards brought little change, with sitting members being re-elected regardless of party except for a sitting Conservative who unwisely contested and lost Highland ward in what was in the 1890s safe Liberal country. During the years 1899–1903 the country as a whole favoured the Conservatives and in Portsmouth the two parliamentary elections in 1900 both showed local swings to the Conservatives. The South African war and its associated wave of jingoist sentiment particularly touched the garrison town of Portsmouth and local results favoured the Conservatives, whose image as the 'patriot party' was always strong. Sitting Liberals were defeated in Charles Dickens and Buckland wards. This sapping of Liberal vitality during the early years of the century is evident in the declining number of Liberal candidates and a sharp rise in the number of uncontested seats or seats where Labour alone challenged the Conservatives. The failure of Liberals to oppose Conservatives in Charles Dickens, Havelock and Town Hall wards, all of which had been fruitful a few years earlier, is especially remarkable.

A Liberal revival occurred locally as well as nationally in the 1905–1907 period, and the Liberal general election victory of 1906 had a precursor in the local Liberal victory of 1905 when a sitting Conservative was defeated in Fratton and Kingston and Havelock were held in the face of a determined challenge. Further victories followed in 1906 with Liberals defeating sitting members in Mile End and St Simon's. This rash of successes ended in 1908 when Liberals came under attack from both Conservatives and Labour, losing St Thomas's to the former and Buckland to the latter. Buckland has perhaps the most interesting history of all wards over the 1895–1914 period, being the most contested ward in the city and having the distinction of returning the first Labour member, MacTavish in 1908, and also supporting the independent Hemingway against a three-party challenge from 1904 to 1913. The general elections of 1910 show a confused local electorate which swung to the Conservatives in January and back to the Liberals in December.

The gains of 1905–07 were held, with the exception of St Simon's which had never before nor since gone Liberal, and Mile End which was lost to an Independent. Labour fought fiercely between 1908 and 1914 but succeeded in taking only two seats, Kingston and St Mary's, both from sitting Conservatives. The absence of Labour gains is surprising in the light of the support Labour received in the 1906 general election, although the Labour losses of 1914, in the growing shadow of European war, were not unexpected. One seat passed to each of the Conservatives and the Liberals. Over the whole period 1895–1914 the Conservatives received a considerably larger vote than the Liberals and were rewarded by around 50% more councillors (Table 2).

Three themes run through the local politics of the interwar period. The Conservatives consolidated their position as the ruling party, so that by the outbreak of the second world war they held the allegiance of two-thirds of all councillors and aldermen (Figure 9). The destruction of the Liberal party, the seeds of which were evident earlier, was completed; and Labour representation became a permanent organised opposition. The Great War marks a clear loosening of old political habits and these three trends are evident right from the 1919 election, when large Liberal net losses were exactly equalled by Labour net gains. In 1920 and 1921 it was the Conservatives who took seats from the Liberals in the marginal wards of Mile End, Portsea and Highland.

The Labour debacle of 1922 when five seats were lost relieved some of the pressure on the Liberals who won back Kingston and Fratton, but the main beneficiaries of the Labour collapse were the Conservatives who strengthened their hold on the previously Liberal seats of Highland and Buckland. The 'revival' of 1922 was short-lived and Labour clawed its way back from seeming extinction in the late 1920s, establishing a tradition of party loyalty in Fratton and

Buckland and the previously Conservative ward of Charles Dickens. Meanwhile the Conservatives drove the Liberals from St Mary's, Kingston and Havelock.

If these trends appear to be operating with less vigour in the 1930s than in the 1920s, it is merely because there were then far fewer Liberal seats to fall, and Labour, having captured the core of 'working-class' Portsmouth, had few new worlds to conquer. Between 1929 and 1938 the political pendulum wobbled rather than swung violently. The Conservatives maintained between 26 and 33 Council seats while Labour varied from five to eight and the Liberals dwindled to two. The swing to the Conservatives in the early 1930s, noted in the 1931 general election, is not evident in local elections with the Conservatives actually losing seats in 1931, 1932 and 1933. Only in 1935 and 1936 did the Conservatives start to pick up seats, although in the parliamentary election of 1935, two out of the three Portsmouth divisions swung to Labour.

Throughout the whole inter-war period the Liberals emerged with a net loss of 15 seats, while both Conservatives and Labour gained seven each and there was one more Independent in 1938 than there had been in 1919 (Table 2).

The outbreak of war and the consequent Local Elections (Temporary Provision) Act caused the suspension of the November 1939 elections and the abandonment of elections for the duration of hostilities. When seats fell vacant the respective party nominated a successor. This arrangement worked reasonably well, although of course fossilising the 1938 political pattern, with most of the 11 nominees being previously unsuccessful candidates, of whom four later held their seats in the 1945 elections.

Party Fortunes

The main problem confronting an analysis of the changing fortunes of the political parties in the municipal arena stems from a coyness of both candidates and reporters in identifying clearly individuals' political affiliation. The statement that 'politics has no place in the council chamber' and 'the councillor represents equally all interests in his ward' reoccur consistently in the election speeches of candidates, even when the speaker was the direct nominee of a party. Although plainly this 'neutrality' was in itself a political stance, strongly associated with the Right, it cannot be dismissed as mere posing. Party organisation and party discipline over its representatives, such as exist today with the political group system, was much less well developed, especially in the pre-1914 period, and comparison with the present is deceptive. Party programmes and city-wide election manifestoes were rare. Candidates offering allegiance to the same party frequently opposed each other. Three Conservatives, for example, contested Portsea in 1904 and most wards had 'mixed' party representation.

It was the rise of the Labour party that decisively changed the nature of local politics. From 1900 Labour candidates quite deliberately declared their political allegiance. Local Labour parties selected and endorsed candidates who were openly pledged to support an agreed policy. The idea of councillors being members of a group in the chamber and in committee was also introduced by Labour, and only the lack of sufficient Labour members prevented the group system operating before 1914. The traditional parties expressed shock at these new attitudes, and the incomprehension and distaste of the old order can be detected in a speech by Neville Chamberlain in 1929.

> "In recent years a new type of socialist councillor has appeared and seems to be on the increase. He is a party man and a class man entirely. He has no consideration for economy, for prudence, for that wisdom which suits ends to means. He is out to stir up trouble. He is noisy and insolent to authority." (*Portsmouth News*, 5/10/1929).

Distaste, however, soon gave way to imitation and in the inter-war period the Conservative party, in particular, adopted similar procedures of selection and group behaviour. Nevertheless throughout the 1920s the *Portsmouth Times* still gave an annual tally of members under the two categories of 'Labour councillors' and 'other councillors'.

Throughout the 60 years under review the Conservative party at municipal as well as parliamentary level was the dominant force and more often than not the 'party of government' at the Guildhall. Between 1885 and 1895, however, the number of Liberal votes just exceeded Conservative votes and 76 Liberals were returned compared with 77 Conservatives. The 1895–1914 period was less happy for the Liberals despite their parliamentary successes and the Liberal vote was only two-thirds of the Conservative, and elected only 142 councillors compared with 194 Conservatives. In the inter-war period the Conservative dominance was even more pronounced with the Conservative vote exceeding the main opposition by 50% and Conservative councillors outnumbering all others by two to one. Despite their position as the party of government the Conservatives never achieved a majority of the popular vote between 1885 and 1945. In terms of seats, however, the whole period is one of

Conservative consolidation with four net gains between 1885 and 1895, four net gains between 1896 and 1914 and a further seven net gains between 1919 and 1938.

As with the parliamentary patterns, one of the most interesting features of the period is the change in the party of opposition with the eclipse of the Liberals and rise of Labour. These two features are not necessarily coincident as there is some evidence of Liberal decline before the election of the first Labour member, and Labour candidates more often opposed Conservatives than Liberals. It is difficult to identify clearly the point of emergence of the nascent Labour party onto the political scene. During the early 1890s some candidates, usually Liberals, made special appeals to the working class, claimed to represent the interests of labour, and were labelled 'radicals'. Booker, the unsuccessful Liberal candidate for St James in 1891, is a good example. In 1894 the Portsmouth Trades Council, whose foremost role in promoting working-class candidates has already been mentioned in the parliamentary context, put up 'labour' candidates in St Matthew's and St James's wards, without first seeking the approval of the Portsmouth Liberal Association. In retaliation, official Liberal candidates were selected for both wards. This can be regarded as a turning-point, in that Liberal tutelage of the embryonic Labour party was weakened and both seats, which in the previous year had been won by Liberals, were lost to Conservatives. The Lib/Lab alliance was patched up in 1896 and 'labour' alone unsuccessfully opposed the Conservatives in St Mary's. In 1897, however, the Trades Council introduced a new tactic of circulating a questionnaire to all candidates, asking for answers on various labour issues. Trades Council endorsement was then given to all candidates who answered satisfactorily, whether Liberals or not. In 1897 three Liberals, one Conservative and one Independent were thus endorsed. Again in 1899 Porter, the successful Conservative candidate in Charles Dickens Ward, received Trades Council support because of his stated sympathy with labour issues whilst his Liberal opponent did not.

It is curious that the necessity for a break between Labour and the Liberals was determined by practical rather than ideological considerations. The Portsmouth Conservative press was never slow to point out that working-class councillors could not support themselves financially and would not therefore satisfactorily discharge their civic duties. The Liberals never faced up to the problem of financing working-class candidates and ultimately the only solution was for the Trades Council to support separate candidates.

The establishment of the national 'Labour Representation Committee' led to the nomination of the first three official Labour candidates, who came bottom of the polls in St Paul, Havelock and Buckland. The exercise was repeated every year between 1902 and 1907 with Labour fighting in a small group of wards, including St Simon's, Kingston, Buckland and Havelock, and less frequently Charles Dickens and Town Hall. The breakthrough came at last in 1908 in Buckland when the colourful and outspoken MacTavish narrowly took the seat for Labour at his second attempt. He remained a lone voice, however, until 1911 when he was again returned with a comrade from St Mary's ward; and the election of a Labour member for Kingston ward in 1912 created a Labour group of three which survived until 1914. In that year, however, both Buckland and St Mary were lost and Labour was reduced to a single member throughout the war-time political hiatus.

The immediate post-war election brought four new Labour and Co-operative members and Kingston was successfully defended. This seeming breakthrough proved, however, to be a false dawn. No additional seats were won in 1920 or 1921, and in 1922 all the seats won in 1919 were lost. Many must have agreed with the *Hampshire Telegraph* which noted that Labour had proceeded from birth to extinction in 14 years. The renaissance of the 1920s was as protracted as the initial flowering in the 1900s had been. Charles Dickens was won in 1923 and held in 1926. In 1927 representatives from Portsea and Mile End were added. Around the core of Charles Dickens, Buckland and later Fratton, a Labour group was rebuilt, comprising four members in 1928 and rising to eight in 1929. Throughout the 1930s the number of Labour members fluctuated, but although control of the council was not achieved there was now also no question of extinction and Labour was established as the main opposition group.

The demise of the Liberal party in local politics occurred as a result of a slow sapping of support, punctuated by revivals, rather than as a sudden catastrophic collapse. From polling 49.2% of the total vote between 1885 and 1895, they slipped to 34.9% between 1895 and 1914 and only 9.2% between 1919 and 1939. Good years such as 1905–07 or 1914 could not permanently stem the steady net loss of seats that was evident even during the 15 years before the Great War. The vicious circle of a declining total vote and fewer candidates was established. Well-known local politicians continued to get elected under

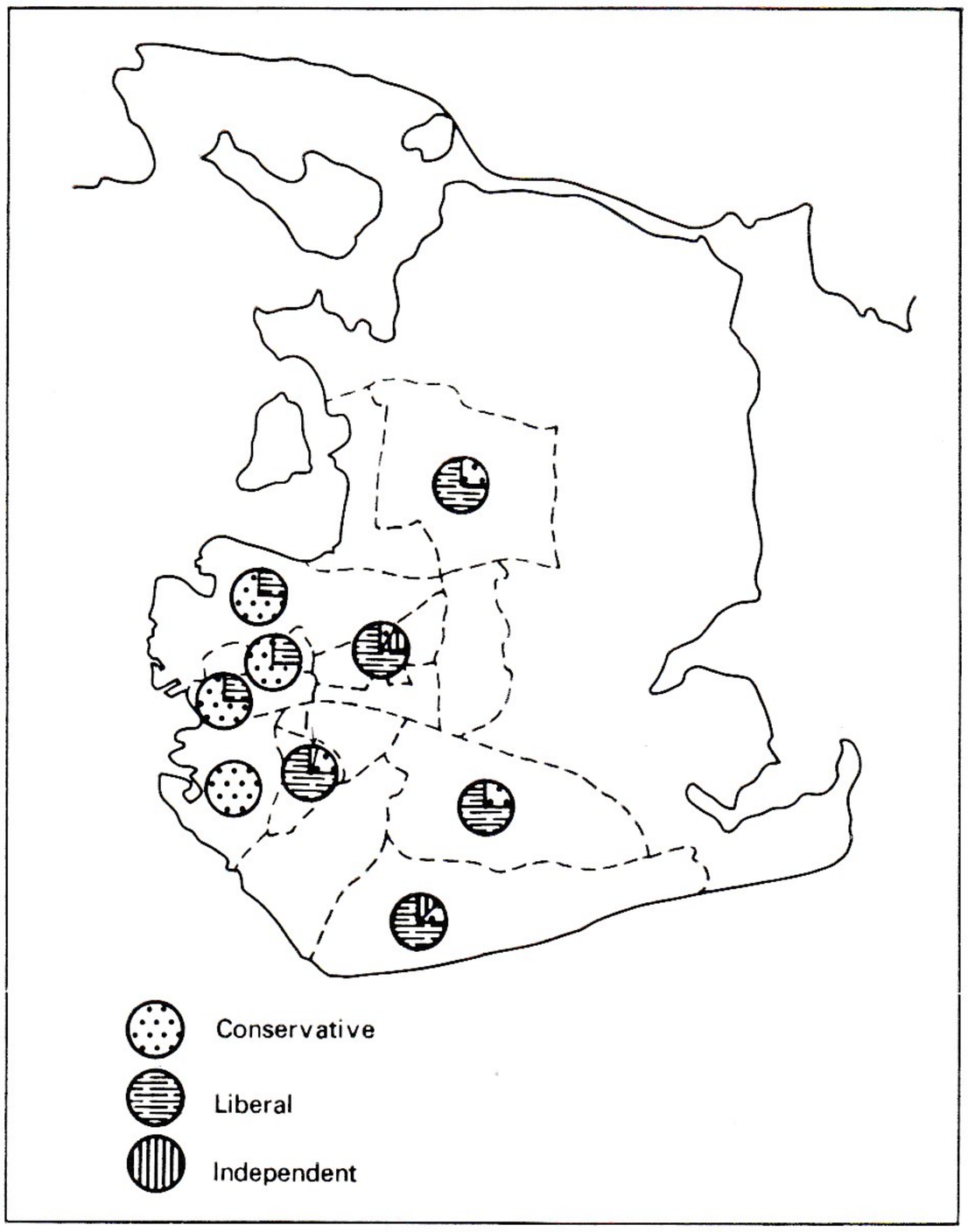


Figure 12: Party Territories 1885-1895.

the Liberal label after 1900, such as Fulljames, Couzens, Aylwin or Young, but few new names appear to reinforce the Liberal interest.

In the inter-war period the Liberal 9.2% of the vote earned them 13.2% of the councillors while Labour's 31.5% of the vote elected only 11.3% of the councillors. The Liberal 'grand old men' of the council were returned, either unopposed or with only Labour opposition. A quarter of Liberal members were elected unopposed in this period but no new Liberal contestants were emerging and less than 10% of the total candidates represented the Liberal interest. The party was thus an empty shell long before its representatives disappeared from the council chamber.

The Independents and minor parties did not generally fare well in the city. Between 1885 and 1895 they polled only 2.2% of the vote and returned only a single member. Between 1895 and 1914 they polled 7.2% of the vote and won five contests. They did best in the inter-war period when their 10.5% vote earned 34 members. Independents are difficult to identify, however, as most candidates declared a degree of independence and the strength of party attachment is difficult to gauge. 'National' candidates can be counted as Conservatives, and Co-operative candidates with Labour, as these groups were never opposed by their parent party. Similarly internal party disputes led to 'Independent Labour' standing in 1936 against an official candidate, and 'Independent Conservatives' stood in 1921, 1922, 1927 and 1930. The most successful 'true' Independent being opposed at times by nominees of all three major parties was undoubtedly Hemingway, who took Buckland from a sitting Conservative in 1904 and defended it successfully against Conservative, Liberal and Labour challenges in 1907, 1910 and 1913. Even this stout Independent succumbed eventually, joining the Conservatives and fighting Buckland in 1920 and 1923 under a Conservative label.

A few minor parties enlivened the political scene, usually without electoral success. In the earlier period temperance candidates occasionally appeared, even in competition with official Liberals, especially if the seat's incumbent was associated with what was coyly called 'the trade'. 1886, 1887, 1892 and 1893 all saw Conservative licencees being unsuccessfully opposed by temperance candidates. Among the other usually ephemeral parties was the 'Single Tax Party' reported in Buckland in 1910, and the Portsmouth Women Citizens Association which took advantage of the 1918 electoral reforms to sponsor Kate Edmund's opposition to Frank Privett in the St Simon's by-election of that year. Unexpectedly the first woman candidate also became the first woman councillor. The seat was lost in 1920 and the organisation did not sponsor another. The 'Christian Social Council' made an appearance in 1919 and its nominees were elected for Town Hall ward and in 1920 also for St Mary's. Both 'Christian Social Council' members eventually became Conservatives. 'Ratepayers' entered eight candidates against both Labour and Conservative opponents between 1929 and 1937, four of which were successful. The 'party for the unemployed' arose from the special circumstances of 1932 and unsuccessfully contested two seats.

Special mention should be made of the Co-operative party which worked closely with Labour. This party, which appeared suddenly in 1919, is notable for its tendency to select women as candidates. In the inter-war period 31 Co-operative candidates were endorsed and two elected (Table 3).

TABLE 3

WOMEN IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

	% Candidates	*% Councillors*
Conservative	1.6	2.1
Liberal	—	—
Labour/Co-operative	9.1	2.9
Others	1.2	—
Total	3.9	1.7

Ward Characteristics

The concepts of 'safe', 'hopeless' and marginal seats are only really applicable after the first world war

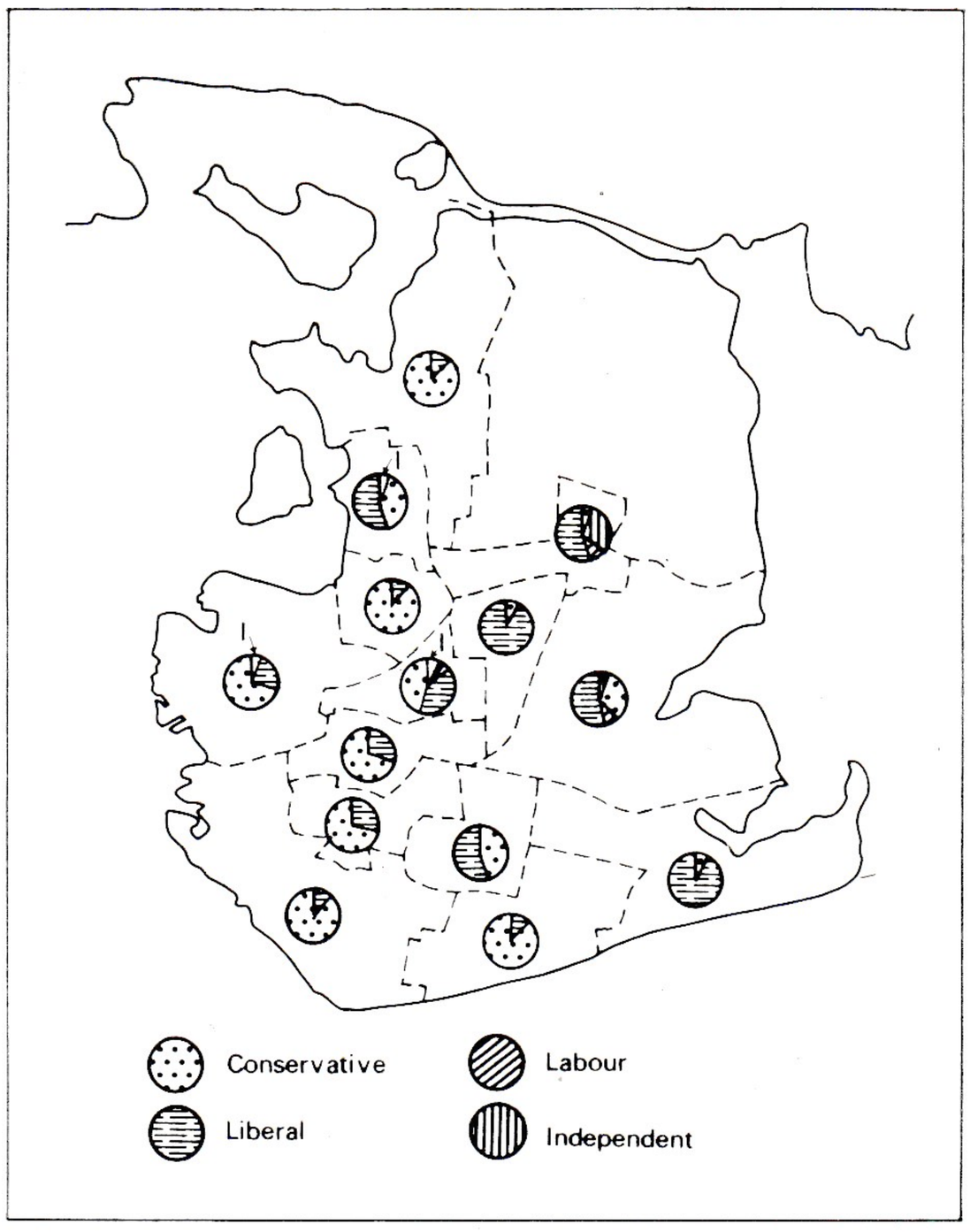


Figure 13: Party Territories 1896-1914.

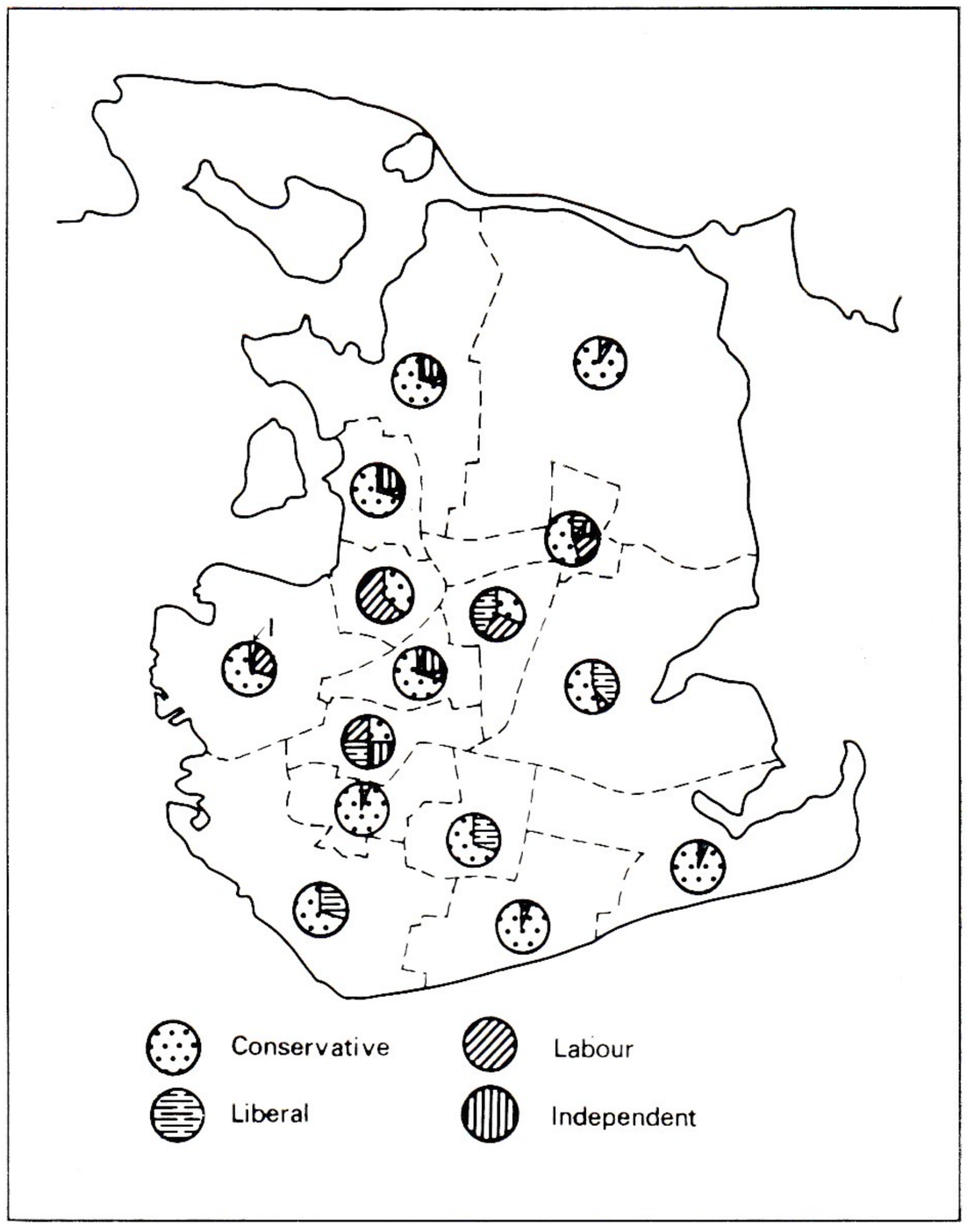


Figure 14: Party Territories 1918-1938.

when the major political parties controlled the selection of candidates. In the 1885–95 period particularly, changes in political control occur more often. St John's which could be classified as a 'safe' Conservative seat unexpectedly and seemingly inexplicably elected Liberals in 1887 and 1891, or again St Bartholomew's, after having returned seven consecutive Liberals, returned a lone Conservative in 1892.

Nevertheless it is possible tentatively to isolate 'Conservative country' in the late nineteenth century (Figure 12), with St Thomas's never faltering in its allegiance and St George's, St John's and All Saints being Conservative in all but freak years. Similarly St Mark's, St Mary's, St Paul's, St Bartholomew's and St Simon's formed the Liberal bastions. The remaining wards were a no-man's-land where gains and losses were normally experienced. It is tempting to relate these safe seats to the distribution of social classes at the time. It would be dangerous, however, to place too much reliance on such a correlation as not only is it difficult to deduce class distributions at this time but it is also by no means clear that voting patterns had become as polarised along class lines as was later the case. Certainly the Conservatives included Landport and Portsea in their territory as well as the villas of Southsea, while the Liberals were strong in both artisan and lower-middle-class districts in the centre of the island.

After the ward reorganisation of 1895 a similar pattern emerged. Over the 1896–1914 period (Figure 13) the Conservative strongholds were clearly the resort seats of St Simon's and St Thomas's, the recently developed suburb of North End and less explicably the dominantly artisan districts around the dockyard such as Charles Dickens, Town Hall and Portsea. The Liberals were strong in a central swathe of the island from Kingston and Buckland in the east to Mile End and Fratton in the west.

The most fruitful soil for the nascent Labour party was found in previously Liberal seats. In the period before the Great War Labour members were returned only in the former Liberal strongholds of Buckland and Kingston and the 'no-man's-land' of St Mary's. After 1919 this tendency was furthered by Labour successes in Liberal seats such as Fratton, Highland and Mile End. Labour also, however, made inroads into areas where working-class Conservatives had been strong such as Portsea; and the safest Labour seat in the city, Charles Dickens, which elected 12 Labour members in 20 years, had previously been Conservative.

Liberal successes in the later period were relatively few and in no ward were Liberals returned in a majority of years. Nevertheless their best seats, returning eight and nine members respectively in the 20 years, were Kingston and Fratton, both seats also won by Labour.

The Conservative party was dominant over most of the city in the inter-war period but Highland, St Paul's and St Simon's stand out as particularly safe, the last two having a long tradition of Conservative representation and Highland having been a safe Liberal seat before 1914 (Figure 14).

The relationship between Council seats and

parliamentary fortunes in the three parliamentary divisions of the inter-war period is interesting. The safety of the Conservative hold over Portsmouth South is reflected in the string of safe Conservative wards along the seaboard from St Thomas's to St Simon's and the absence of any ward from which an opposition counter-attack could be launched. Portsmouth North was less secure, but three of the five wards could be counted as safe and only in Charles Dickens, a consistently Labour ward, was opposition to be found in strength. The parliamentary volatility of Portsmouth Central is paralleled by the complexity of its Council representatives with no party being able to claim it as safe territory. Two of the wards, Fratton and Kingston, were held by Liberals throughout most of the 1920s and later both were frequently won by Labour as was Buckland. The remaining wards, St Mary's and Town Hall, were never firmly in the control of any of the three parties. Plainly it is not surprising therefore that Portsmouth Central was the only Portsmouth constituency between the wars to elect either Liberal or Labour members, but equally clearly neither had secure tenure and the reversion of the seat to the Conservatives in the 1930s was not unexpected.

Most of the characteristics of the post-1945 political scene can be seen to have their origins in the inter-war period or even earlier. The polarisation between organised left and organised right, the Conservative hold on the southern seaboard and the north of the island, compared with the Labour control of the western and central wards, and the absence of effective third parties, whether Liberals, Ratepayers or Independents, were all well established by 1939.

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